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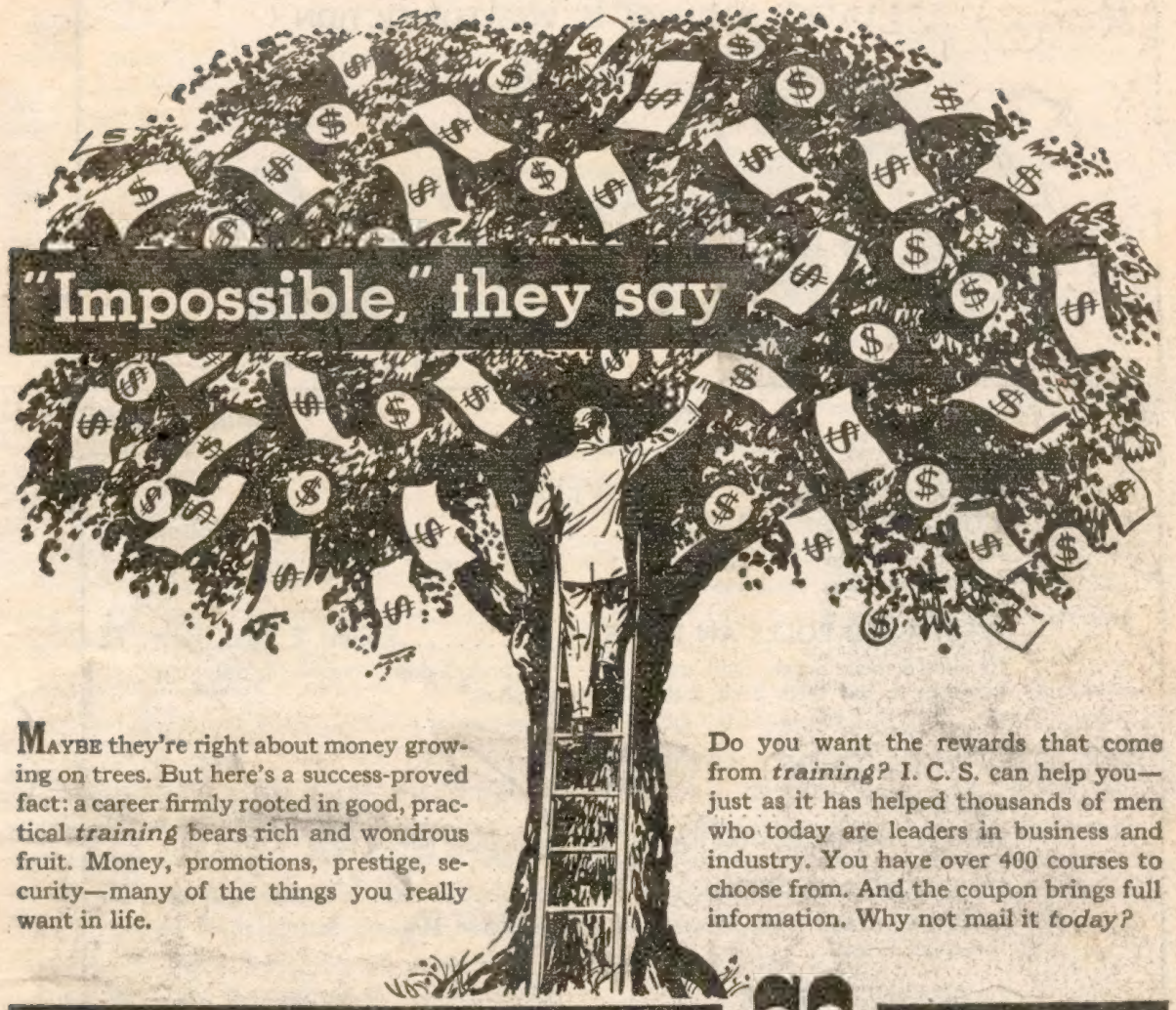

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NEW WESTERN MAGAZINE

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Vol. 24, No. 1 CONTENTS January, 1952

TWO GALLOPING WESTERN NOVELETTES

BRAND OF THE PRODIGAL ..... Eli Colter 10

Only one Gloster was still alive, but to the Hull ranch that was one damned Gloster too many—and one war to go!

WESTWARD ROLLS AN EMPIRE ..... Robert E. Mahaffay 72

He shared their meager food and rode in their broken-down wagons for only one purpose: to pay them back with their own bullets!

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FIVE COLORFUL SHORT STORIES

BACK PAY ..... Marvin De Vries 27

Lolly Shay was hungry—but the lead diet the stranger offered wasn't Lolly's dish.

UP COMES McGINTY! ..... Verne Athanas 36

Until now, it had never occurred to mighty Moose McGinty that he could be beaten in a fight. . . .

LAWMAN'S HONOR ..... William R. Cox 45

Not even his brother's badge was big enough for Payne Harper to hide behind.

STACKED DECK ..... Max Kesler 54

Ex-drummer J. P. Willouby had a tough commodity to sell that day: sudden death.

THE KID COMES BACK ..... Charles Beckman, Jr. 64

Traveler learned it the hard way: You can't build a new life on a foundation of destruction.

TWO WESTERN FEATURES

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THE STRAWBOSS

HISTORY is a deep, rushing river, turbulent and troubled. And, as with a river, generally all we know of it is its surface. The underground springs that swell it, the hidden life that moves through its murky bottom, the derelicts that float submerged in its depths—all these are hidden from the casual observer.

And once it has passed us, its secrets are gone forever, swept into the ocean of the unknown.

But occasionally the fisherman drops his net into an eddy and brings up some bit of flotsam that gives him a clue to the vast teeming life beneath the surface. Sometimes a historian, dipping his net into the thousands of aging letters and newspapers and books that lie moldering in countless libraries and attics, brings forth some little incident—obscure and forgotten—that gives life and meaning to the larger course of the moving river of time.

As countless droplets make up a mighty river, so countless millions of people make up history. Every man's story is important and significant. The story of Bill England, presented here now, is especially meaningful.

The gun-thunder of the Tonto Basin war had long since rumbled away; at old Fort Sumner grass grew high on forgotten graves which marked the final resting place of Lincoln County warriors. Now, nearly two decades later, and far to the northward, again the air was ominous with the first hint of powdersmoke. Hell was about to pop in Johnson County, and the small-spread ranchers were headed for their needings—in gunsmoke.

One of these men was a hard-driving, fighting gent named Bill England. Bill, stocky and determined, had settled along the Sweetwater in the middle eighties. He had good water, grazing land, and also a young wife and small son.

With impassive face and smoldering eyes, Bill heard the proclamation of the big ranchers: Sell out—at their own price, or reap a harvest of grief. Bill told them where to go, and took to packing a saddle

(Continued on page 8)

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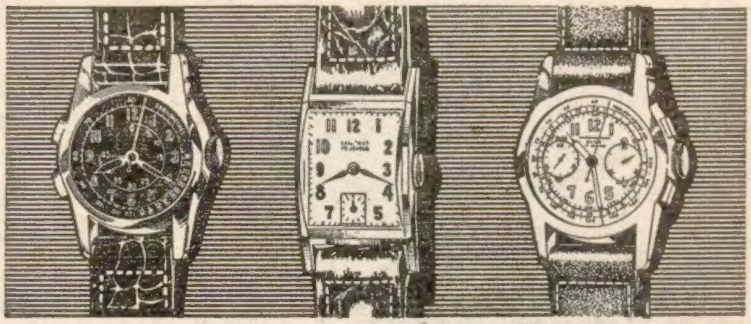

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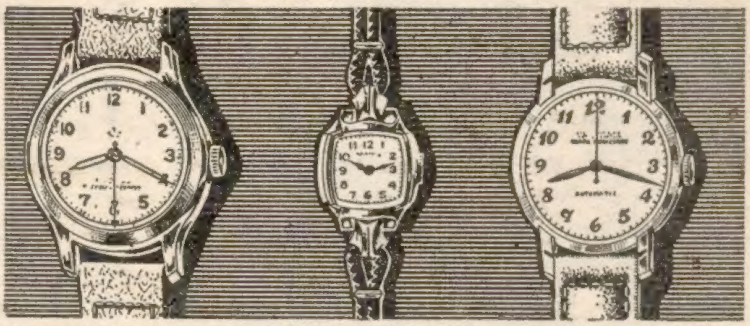

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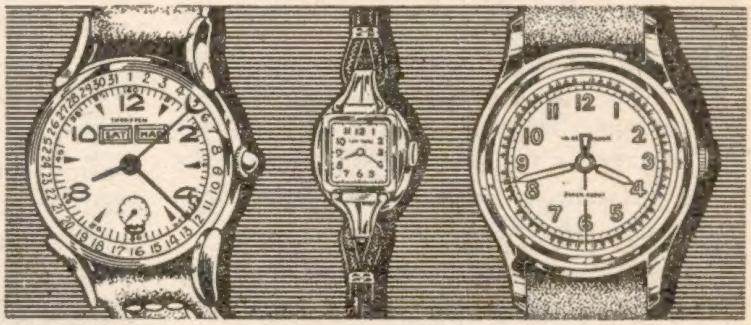

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(Continued from page 6)

gun and loaded six-shooter when he rode range that cold autumn. The tragic toll of that unheeded warning came at the close of a raw, blustering October day when he rode back to find his spread a mass of charred embers, his winter feed destroyed and his boy and sick wife shivering in the barn.

That bitter night, Bill loaded his little family into the wagon, hitched up the horses and what few goods he could salvage and drove on.

He didn't go very far. He took up a government claim in the Powder River country and there, under the big cottonwood in the dooryard before his little tar-paper-covered shack, he buried his wife.

Embittered, striving to contain the hate for those range barons who, Bill told himself, were responsible for his wife's death, he became surly, aloof. Nor was that recluse-like attitude to pass unnoticed among his neighbors. They, perhaps, had suffered much the same as he had; they too cherished a venomous hatred for the big combines. But they were making a go of things where Bill, spurning their neighborly advances, was fighting a losing battle to hold his little spread together.

It was an open secret that most of the small ranchers of Johnson County were fattening their herds of horses and cattle at the expense of the unguarded stock of the Big Pool.

Strangers who steadfastly refused to take advantage of the opportunities offered by Big Pool herds swiftly came under suspicion of their neighbors.

One night a party of men rode up to Bill England's spread. He went to the door, rifle in his hand. Grimly, stiffly, the leader swung down from his saddle.

"We're plannin' to get back at them Pool gunnies," the man told Bill England. "We're ridin' out to run off a bunch of long yearlin's. We want to know—are you with us or agin' us?'le.

Bill England leaned back against the doorway and bored the speaker with his cold eyes. "Mister," he said, "stealin' cows never did appeal to me as satisfactory payment for a human life. If you was fightin' men, it strikes me that you'd ride out a-shootin'. Until that time comes—to hell with you an' your two-bit cow-stealin'!"

After that, there was talk in town of visiting Bill with a good hemp rope. There were mutterings that he was a traitor to his own kind; that he was yellow; that he was a spy of the Big Pool. And to all of that Bill England had nothing to say. But the breach widened between him and his neighbors. And they might soon have left Bill a corpse, had not something of more immediate importance served to distract the small ranchers' attention.

THERE was no secret about it. The half-concealed plans were carried in every newspaper from Chicago to the Coast. How the big ranchers, stung finally to showdown, had spent months gathering more hard-bitten gun-riders. A well-equipped army, they rode with hundreds of rounds of shells, with carbines, buffalo guns and six-shooters. They had with them newspaper correspondents and skilled medicos. It was to be a complete wipe-out in Johnson County.

If Bill England heard of it, he paid it little heed. All his thoughts and his energy were going in to building up his own spread.

In order to insure secrecy, the invaders, with military thoroughness, severed telegraph and telephone wires as they moved along. In the early dawn, they surrounded Nate Champion's cabin, killed two visitors in the cabin and then Nate. The story of Champion's fight is an oft-repeated and glorious saga of one man's courage against overpowering odds. . . .

Bill England, early that morning, had cause to go to Buffalo for supplies. Be-

(Continued on page 104)

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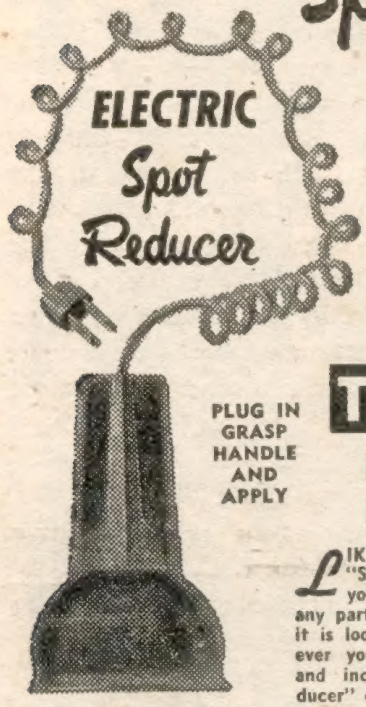

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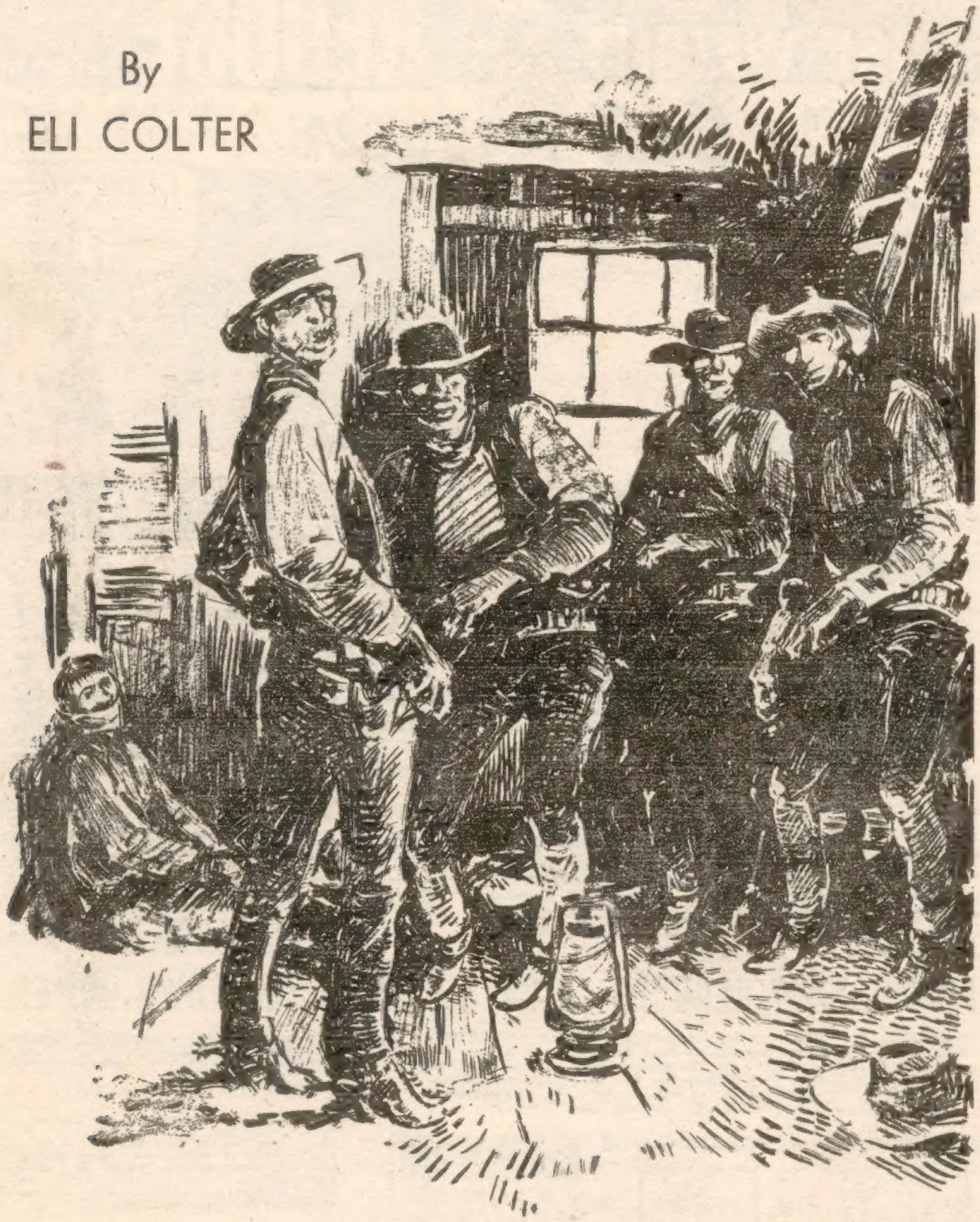
On that feud-torn range, where one side had branded him "coward" and the other "killer"—which side was he to fight for?

By
ELI COLTER



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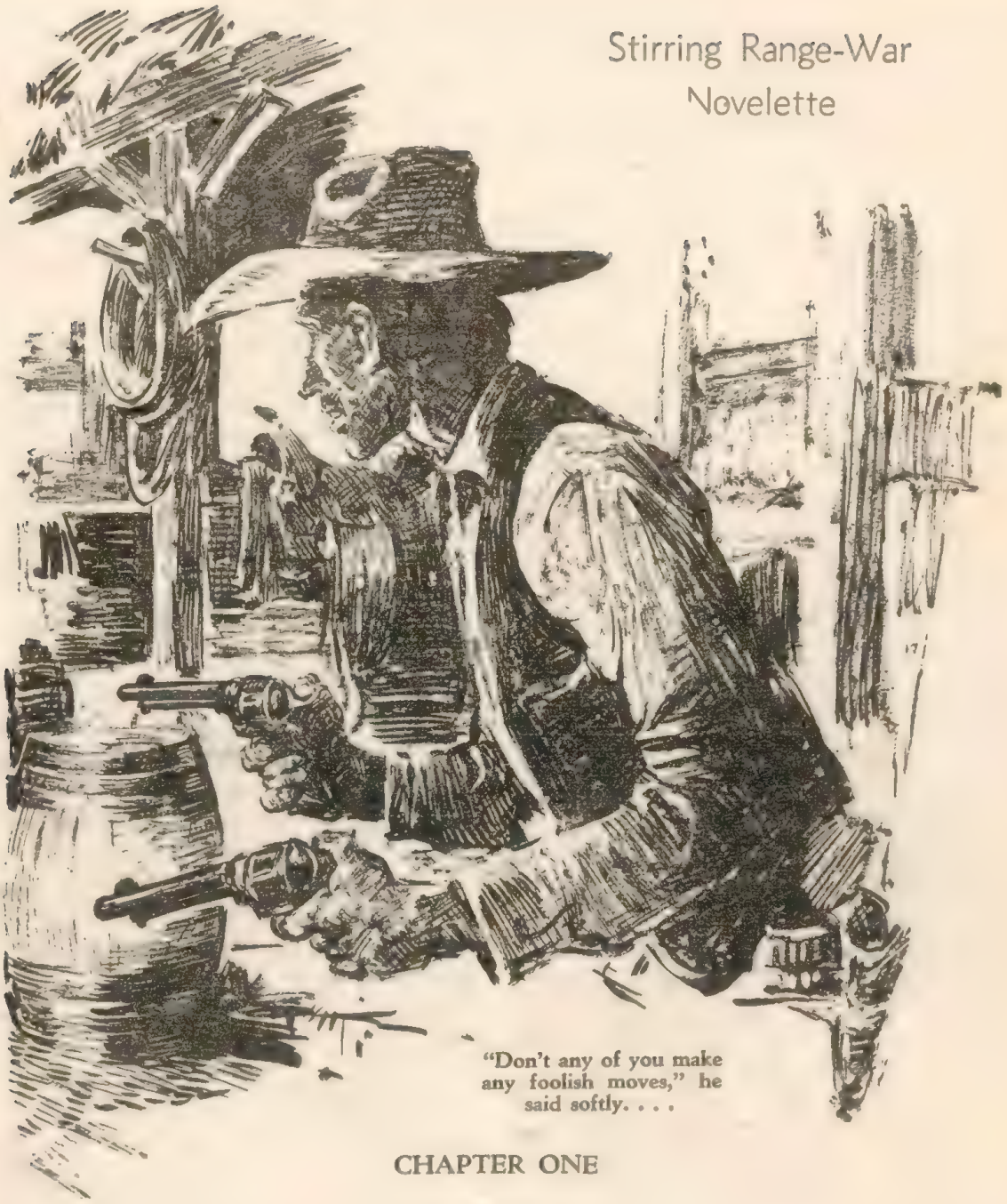

"Don't any of you make any foolish moves," he said softly. . . .

CHAPTER ONE

The Stranger

IT WAS a hot afternoon in August when the stranger came riding by the Hull ranch in Montana's rugged hills. Irvin Mackey and Albert Emerson were standing in the front yard near the fence.

Emerson, foreman of the Lazy H for the best part of his life, was tall and gaunt, burned walnut-brown by fifty-two summer suns. Irvin Mackey, a couple of years past thirty, was short and broad, red-haired and freckled and jovial.

Blaze Farragut had just come out of the house onto the porch, and had paused there leaning against the hand rail, idly watching Mackey and Emerson. Blaze was the newest hand on the Lazy H; he had been there only five years. He was a little taller than Emerson and a trifle younger than Mackey.

Emerson's voice carried clearly to the porch, saying to Mackey, "You know, that *could* be Chuck Gloster comin' up the road now, on that white-faced dun."

Mackey's freckled face darkened in a scowl, as he stared at the approaching horseman. "Could be, at that. I sure wouldn't recognize him now, would you?"

"No, don't reckon I would, Irv. Don't reckon none of us would." Emerson's sunken eyes were intent on the strange rider. "If it *is* him, I hope to hell he breaks his neck before he reaches the Rafter G."

Mackey pursed his lips in a low whistle. "Look at the color of his face, Al! He's sure been stuck away in *some* kind of hole where the sun couldn't reach him."

Blaze Farragut started down the steps, to cross the yard and join the other two Lazy H men at the fence. He was an odd-looking man in some ways: His shoulders were broad and high, the line of his lips turned sharply upward at the corners and gave his mouth the deceptive appearance of always being on the verge of a smile, his dark blue eyes were a little hard and held a continual glimmer of suspicion. He headed toward Emerson and Mackey, and came up with them just as the man on the dun stopped in the road and addressed the foreman.

"Hi, cowboy. Wonder if you could direct me to the Rafter G Ranch?"

The stranger's pale features were long and horsy. His teeth were big and protruding, so that his mouth never quite closed. His chin receded and his forehead was narrow. Once seen, he wasn't one to be easily forgotten.

Emerson was about to answer when he heard Farragut's heavy voice drawl behind him, "The Rafter G is a good place to stay away from, unless they're lookin' for you, fella."

The stranger eyed Farragut across Emerson's shoulder. "Yeah? What do you mean by that?"

Farragut said, "There's a sidewinder due on the Rafter G any day now, who's probably aimin' to raise hell. Unless somebody spikes his guns for him."

There was a faint sneer on the stranger's mouth. "I suppose you're plannin' on doin' the gun-spikin'?"

Farragut said, "That's right. And I'm just the boy that can do it, too."

FOR an instant there was a tight little silence. Farragut's slow retort had contained all the elements of a declaration of war. Mackey didn't understand it. Emerson thought he could guess the answer. He waited, tensed, watching Farragut out of the corner of his eye.

The stranger shrugged. "Sorry, I ain't interested. I'm Jude Newland. All I'm doin' is civilly askin' directions to the Rafter G, and waitin' for a civil answer."

Emerson said, "Okay. It's your funeral. Never say we didn't warn you. Nobody ever had trouble findin' the Rafter G yet, as I know of. Go straight up this road to the forks; take the right fork and keep goin'—it's the Rafter G's private road."

"Thanks." He squinted sharply at Al Emerson. "What's all this hostility about, anyway? What's your quarrel with the Rafter G? If it's any of my business."

Emerson's reply was curt. "Just a good old-fashioned family feud, Newland—if you're as ignorant as you're lettin' on."

Mackey said, "Between the Hulls and the Glosters, since the year one."

Emerson stood watching Newland, waiting, listening, his mind gone swiftly back through the years.

* * *

In Emerson's day, there had been nine Hulls: Steve Hull, his wife and seven children. There had been ten Glosters: Verne Gloster, his wife and eight children. They'd kept up their fool feuding until none of the Hulls was left but Dave and his sister Loreena, and the only Gloster extant was

Chuck. Then Dave had been found on the range with half his head blown away.

Irv Mackey had said at the time, weeping in futile rage, "Chuck done it! Everybody knows Chuck done it! But nobody can prove it. So all he gits is ten years in the pen, when he should've been hung higher'n heaven's gate!"

Loreena had turned over the running of the ranch to Emerson, had left Montana and sworn never to return until everybody got some sense into their heads and the feud was at an end. And now the ten years were up, and somewhere between here and the pen, Chuck Gloster was on the way home, Emerson told himself, ready to pick up where he had left off. Unless he was already here.

* * *

Emerson jerked his mind back to the present, hearing Farragut's slow drawl addressing the man who had introduced himself as Jude Newland.

"It's sure going to *be* your business, if you don't keep your nose clean and take the fastest route out of other people's troubles, Newland. And I only bark once before I bite, fella."

Newland said, "Like I told you—all I want is to get to the Rafter G. So I'll bid you belligerent buzzards so long and be on my way." He clucked to his horse and rode away.

No one spoke, no one moved, until he was well beyond hearing distance.

Then Emerson looked up at Blaze Farragut. "It's him, Blaze? You sure?"

Farragut laughed shortly. "Think I'd have needled him like that if I wasn't sure, Al?"

Mackey cut in eagerly, "You got an answer from the sheriff!"

Farragut said, "Yeah, I did. He'd telephoned to the warden; warden said it was perfectly true Chuck was out, just been released, time off for good behavior. You write to Loreena, Al, and tell her about Chuck's gettin' out?"

"Sure did. Right away. Warned her that Chuck was out, the worst was likely to come, and for her to stay away from here until everything is clear."

Farragut said, "Sheriff sent a picture, taken in prison when he was first committed. You remember Chuck Gloster very well, Al?"

Emerson shook his gaunt head. "Nope. Afraid not. Nobody ever saw much of him. Old lady kept him close. Tryin' to save her baby from the feudin' guns. That's what they told around, anyhow. When he was hauled up for killin' Dave, he had so much hair on his face he didn't look like nothin' but a bearskin rug. Could you recognize him from that picture the sheriff sent?"

Blaze took a folded paper from his pocket and held it out to Emerson. "Take a look and see what *you* think. They shaved his whiskers before they mugged him."

Emerson spread open the paper and held it so Mackey could have a clear view of it too. It bore the front and profile likenesses of a man. Underneath the pictures words were printed: "Charles (Chuck) Gloster, age (at time of entering penitentiary) twenty-two years, height five feet and eleven inches, weight one hundred and seventy pounds, hair dark brown, eyes brown, distinguishing marks large mole over left ribs and triangular scar above right ear." His prison number was stamped across the bottom of the pictures.

The face was smooth shaven. The features were long and horsy. The teeth were big and protruding, so that the mouth never quite closed. The chin receded and the forehead was narrow.

Emerson folded the paper and handed it back to Blaze Farragut. His gaze followed the man disappearing up the road on the white-faced dun. "Well, well! So Chuck Gloster has come home."

Farragut said, "Yeah. There can't be any doubt about that."

HE AND Emerson fell into step with Mackey, and they started for the house, the three of them abreast. It was nearly dinner time. They could hear, as they ascended the porch steps, the clatter of pans in the kitchen where Willy Yeager, the cook, was at work. They went down the hall and into the dining room, still abreast, and stopped as if somebody had shouted a command to halt.

A tall, slender woman was walking along the table, laying silverware by the plates. She had turned quickly at sound of their entrance into the room. Her bright blue dress was the color of her eyes. Her yellow hair waved away from a delicate and somber face. At the end of the table a four-year-old boy sat watching her.

Al Emerson stared, and then exploded in exasperation. "Loreena! Damn it all, couldn't you hold your horses a while? How the hell did you sneak in here without our seein' you? How long you been here?"

She said flatly, "We've been here about thirty minutes, Jay and I. Came in the back way, left our horses in the barn with Clyde Zeaforth. No, I couldn't wait. I had to come home. I hadn't anywhere else to go." She was not looking at him. The instant the three men had appeared, her gaze had gone plunging to Farragut and held there. She had turned quite white. She said to Emerson, indicating Farragut with a small gesture, her voice hardened, sharp, "What is *he* doing here on the Lazy H?"

Emerson frowned, puzzled. "Why, workin', of course. This is Blaze Farragut. I wrote you when he first joined the crew, five years ago. I've mentioned him often enough since."

She still did not look at Emerson. She said to Farragut, appalled, "My God! *You're* Blaze Farragut?"

Farragut said, "I'm afraid I am. I was hoping you'd never find out. I told you I was coming here to clean up this fool feud. So I came, for that purpose. I've been working as a regular hand, waiting my chance. I'll leave any time you want me to."

Her color had begun to come back a little, but the hard look in her eyes did not change. "My father had a saying, Mr. Farragut, and he was a just man. He used to say, 'When any man is honest and upright in his dealings, no matter how black the world may look against him, reserve your judgment and hold your tongue—for that man wears the brand of God.' He brought us up to understand that saying and to respect it."

Farragut said, "Yes? And so?"

Loreena smiled, but it was a thin, cool grimace. "To the best of my knowledge you have always been upright and honorable in your dealings. If you say that's why you came here, I'll believe you until it's proved otherwise."

Emerson and Mackey had remained motionless where they had come to an astonished halt, and stood looking from Farragut to Loreena, then at each other, amazed and bewildered by the expression on Loreena's face, on Farragut's, and by the things being said.

Now the child claimed the attention of the room. "Are you Blaze Farragut?" the boy asked. "Why, I know you!"

Farragut said softly, "Oh, you do? What do you know about me, Jay?"

"I know why they call you Blaze. Cause you used to go out in the woods. And you was scared you'd get lost. So you always made a blaze on the trees. So you could find the way home."

"Yeah, that's sure true enough," Blaze said.

Jay demanded, "What was you scared of?"

Blaze said, "Just of getting lost, son." Before he could speak again, the triangle banged on the back porch, and Willy Yeager's cheerful voice shouted loudly from the kitchen.

"Come and get it! Or I'll throw it out the window!"

CHAPTER TWO

Ambush

THE cowboys came trooping in, and everything else was shoved into the background as they gathered at the table, welcoming Loreena, getting acquainted with Jay.

Emerson asked in a low aside, "You couldn't have got my last letter, Loreena? Tellin' you Chuck Gloster had been turned loose and was on his way back to the Rafter G?"

Loreena said, "No. We were on the way home, Al. We came by train. I rented the horses in town. Clyde can take them back to the livery tomorrow."

Talk turned general then, and Emerson pushed the whole matter out of mind, until after the meal was over. Then he got Farragut off to himself at the head of the lane, where no one could come close enough to eavesdrop without being seen.

He said bluntly and without preamble, "When and where did you know Loreena before, Blaze? What was back of all that talk between you two? Sorry if it seems like pryin', but I think I'd better know."

Farragut said curtly, "Look, Al. There's nothing to it. When I met her before I was going under another name. I had a reason."

"Yeah? Let's hear it."

"There isn't much to it, Al. When I was a kid, I witnessed a gunfight between my father and another man. It scared the hell out of me. For years I was afraid of my shadow."

Emerson said, "And just where was this?"

Farragut said bitterly, "I was brought up in Park County, Wyoming. I was known as the no-good Farragut kid, the son of that lowdown shiftless horse thief Farragut and the brat of whiskey-soaked Mag Farragut. By the time I was eighteen, they were both dead. I got out of there. I went over into the Ten Sleep country, to the town of Ketchahoosie. All the idea I had was to leave everything else behind and start a new life. So I took a new name, too."

Emerson whistled. "Oh, oh! And that was where you met Loreena."

"That's right. I'd had one friend back in Park County. He was the only one who knew where I went or what become of me. He got sick of Park County, too. He followed me to Ketchahoosie. His name was Bert Preston."

Emerson stared. "The Bert Preston Loreena married?"

"That's right. I fell in love with her, she fell in love with Bert. I moved on again. Before I left, I made Bert promise he'd never tell her I was Blaze Farragut. He'd already told her about Blaze Farragut, but he hadn't told her I was the guy. He promised he never would. She'd told me about the feud. I figured if I couldn't have her, I could serve her, maybe—and clean up the old mess so she could come home and live in peace. That's all there is to it."

Emerson said, "Mmm. What was the name she knew you by in Ketchahoosie, Blaze?"

"It doesn't matter. I'm wearing my own name now, Al. Skip it. I figured I'd come here, do her a good turn if I could, and move on. I figured she'd never know anything about it until I was gone and out of the picture, if she *ever* knew. How could I guess that Bert was going to get himself killed off? And she was going to come home and catch me right in the middle of the whole thing?"

Emerson chuckled dryly. "Did sort of get you into a corner, didn't she?"

They started to walk back down the lane toward the barn, and the foreman came to a sudden stop and gripped Farragut's arm. They both stood still, listening, muscles tensing.

From somewhere out in the field beyond the barn, through the deepening dusk, had come the sound of a shot.

EMERSON said angrily, "That damned Chuck! He ain't losin' no time, is he?"

The two men broke into a run, headed for the barn. Inside the big twilit building, they found that Clyde Zeaforth's mount, and the two horses hired by Loreena for her and Jay, all were gone.

Emerson said, "Clyde must have decided to take the livery nags back this evenin'—he always did like ridin' at night. Double-damn that Chuck! There was only one shot, Blaze."

Farragut said, "Yeah. Clyde never had a chance to shoot back. What'd you expect of a louse that'd make war on a woman and a kid? The kid's a Preston, but there's Hull blood in his veins."

Emerson said, "Fan 'em on the tail, Blaze. Maybe we can find Clyde before he's gone. Maybe he had sense enough to throw himself down and play dead, or somethin'."

They went out of the barn on their horses, and kept to the cover of the trees as they headed toward the field in the thickening dusk.

They found Zeaforth still alive, but he had little time left. He was a dying man; they all knew it, and they didn't waste words.

Emerson said, "You get a look at him, Clyde?"

Zeaforth's voice was faint, but steady. "I sure did. What the hell did he care whether I seen him or not? He knew he had me. I wasn't armed. It was plenty light for him to see that."

Farragut asked, "What did he look like?"

Zeaforth's voice stayed clear to the last word. "Horsy. Big teeth that stuck out. Mean little eyes. No chin." His breath stilled in his throat as he died.

Emerson got slowly to his feet. "Fetch the horses, Blaze. We'll tote Clyde in and hold a council of war."

Half an hour later, the entire ranch crew was gathered in the harness room by lantern light, listening to Emerson's report of what had happened to Clyde Zeaforth

Irv Mackey banged a fist on a saddle rack. "Well, by hell, there's only one thing to do. Hightail it over there right now and clean that outfit out to the last man."

Curt Oliver said, "Just a minute, Irv." He turned to Emerson. "Look, Al. Before we all go bargin' out like a lot of Comanches on the warpath, let's find out just where we are. Maybe you better ask Blaze Farragut what he's been doin' goin' over to the Rafter G and swappin' chin music with some of the hands there."

Emerson looked sidewise at Farragut. "You're accused of consortin' with the enemy, Blaze. Anything in it?"

Farragut laughed shortly. "Six of those boys over there ain't the enemy, Al. They're boys I planted there, to help out with the cleanup when the showdown come."

"You sneaked 'em right in there under Reed Underhill's nose?" Underhill was the Gloster foreman.

Farragut said, "That's right. The other five are old hands who were working there before the Glosters was killed off. All of 'em are mean customers. My boys have got to act pretty oily, to keep the others from getting wise. But they'll be on the job."

Emerson said, "Okay, Blaze. You boys put out the lanterns and trek on over to the bunkhouse. We ain't goin' rarin' over to the Rafter G and start blastin', in return for what they done to Clyde. That's just what they want us to do, just what they're expectin' and will be all set for."

Irv Mackey protested, "The hell, Al! What *are* we goin' to do, then?"

Emerson said grimly, "Get all set and let 'em come to us. They'll come foggin' it, once they see we're standin' pat. Don't worry. By tomorrow night we'll be all ready for 'em to walk right in."

They were on the way out of the barn, when Mackey dropped behind the others, fell into step with Emerson, and said uneasily, "I ain't too sure I like this, Al. You believe what Blaze said? About plantin'

men over there on the Rafter G? What the hell is it his put-in?"

Emerson said, "He's in love with Loreena. She turned him down for Bert Preston. Now Preston's dead, maybe Blaze'll have a chance with her himself. He's got a right to try. Let him work it out his own way. We got enough to do to keep our guns oiled, Irv."

Mackey scowled, still uneasy and wary. "Maybe it's all on the up and up, Al. But I'm goin' to keep my fingers crossed. There's somethin' damn funny back of all this."

THEY buried Clyde Zeaforth the next morning. All day there was no sign from the Rafter G. As the afternoon waned, the men set about bulwarking the ranch buildings against attack, and Emerson assigned each of them his allotted station for the night watch. Willy Yeager laid out a hearty spread, from baked potatoes to steak and gravy, and when Willy started raking up the dishes the men filed out to take up their places in the deepening dusk.

Blaze Farragut was the last to leave the ranch house; he had stopped in the kitchen to talk with Willy Yeager. Shortly afterward he went on out of the house the back way, leaving Willy bustling about the kitchen, armed and on guard.

Farragut went straight across the back yard toward the bunkhouse. He had just started to open the bunkhouse door, when a report sounded out beyond the barn, an orange flash blazed among the trees, and a bullet thudded into the door casing less than six inches from his head. Farragut ducked, slid around the corner of the building to the other side wall and rapped on the nearest window pane.

The one dim light in the bunkhouse went out. From inside the long room Curt Oliver demanded, "Who's there?"

"Me, Blaze. They're in the grove. Get movin'."

Oliver said, "Coming!"

The door remained closed. The moonlight would have made fair targets of them at that exit, as it had made—for an instant—of Blaze. Oliver threw up the window on which Farragut had tapped, and the men came crawling out of it.

Oliver asked, "No idea who shot, of course?"

Farragut said, "No. Just saw the flash. If I hadn't still been moving he'd have got me. It was damn close."

Irv Mackey, last out the window, said, "Gill Castor's stationed in the barn, ain't he? Along with Al Emerson?"

"Yeah," Farragut said. "Get moving!"

A shot roared from inside the barn, and somebody cursed and laughed in the grove between the barn and the corral.

Farragut said, "Fan out to the right, so we can check the flashes and get a bead on the grove."

But before they reached the deeper shadow to the right, Mackey slowed, sniffing the air, and moved close to Farragut. "You smell anything, Blaze?"

Oliver said, "I smell smoke!"

Farragut said, "Yeah. I noticed it. I was trying to make out where the smell comes from."

Oliver caught his breath, and cursed. "Hell's bells! Look!"

A faint glow had shown suddenly at the far end of the loft. It flared immediately to bright flames, which licked outward and upward toward the roof.

Farragut said, "The dirty snakes! They've fired the barn! Crawled up the stationary ladder and tossed a torch in the hay, probably. Gill and Al couldn't see 'em from inside the barn."

Mackey said violently, "Well, what are we waitin' for? That barn's full of horses." Horses the men had brought in that day, and placed in the barn ready for saddling on the instant at any hour.

Farragut caught Mackey's arm and jerked him back. "Not that way! Let Gill and Al take care of the horses, they're al-

ready *in* the barn! We'll take the grove."

Oliver snapped, "Okay. Six of us. Which way, Blaze?"

Farragut said, "You and me and Irv to the left. You other three take the right. Close in. Keep to the shadows. And watch your step."

The group divided, and the six men began their advance.

The dry hay was roaring into flash flame now, spurting out the wide end door upstairs in the barn, the door through which the hay was habitually loaded into the loft. The structure was as dry as the hay, and it had caught sparks and ignited now in numerous places.

The horses, hearing the swoosh of the fire, smelling the acrid smoke, were beginning to snort, stamp and kick in terror.

Then the big side door of the barn slid open with a crash, and Gill Castor came racing out with an armful of sacks, rushed up to the horse trough and dumped the sacks into the water.

Castor caught sight of Farragut and Mackey and Oliver sliding silently past in the shadows, yelled at them wildly. "You guys better start shootin'. Chuck Gloster's out there in the grove. He says he ain't leavin' this place tonight as long as there's a Hull or a Hull cowhand left alive!"

None of the three answered him. None of them started shooting. Gill swooped up his armful of dripping wet sacks and darted back into the burning barn.

Farragut said to Oliver and Mackey. "Gill's excited. Keep your hair on. And don't waste any lead."

CHAPTER THREE

Worse Than Fire

AT THE other end of the barn, three more Hull men had rushed from their posts to aid in saving the horses. Al Emerson had stationed them all strategically to withstand seige with force and effectiveness. But Al Emerson hadn't figured on any deliberate firing of any of the buildings; none of the men had. At this other end of the barn, where the three other men came rushing in to aid Al Emerson and Gill Castor, there was another grove that would afford temporary shelter and cover for the horses.

Mark Haley, the man in the lead, panted as he ran, "We can tie the nags in the trees till they're all out of the barn, then rush 'em to the corral."

By the time they reached the big side door, they met Emerson coming out, laboriously dragging at the end of a rope. On the other end of the rope was a smoke-crazed horse, a wet sack over his head, fighting every foot of the way.

Emerson took one look at Haley and the other two racing toward him. "Take this brute over, Mark. All you three. Get 'em to the grove. Gill and I'll bring 'em out."

Haley grabbed the rope out of Emerson's hands, and threw his weight into dragging the horse on out of the way. Emerson whirled to race back into the barn, dodging aside out of the way of Gill Castor, who was emerging from the inferno with another fighting horse blindfolded by a wet sack. One of the other men snatched the rope, and Castor wheeled back into the barn.

The heat of the roaring fire was making itself felt now, the acrid smoke billowing downward, stinging the eyes of men and animals, choking lungs. The night was split in half by leaping flames that had eaten through the roof. The entire barnyard was lighted from grove to grove, from the bunkhouse to the back porch of the ranch house.

Emerson, washed in sweat, half suffocated in murk and heat, shouted to Castor above the racket, "Funny! Nobody shootin'!"

Castor scowled. "Yeah! I noticed!" It had been worrying him for several minutes. There were no shouts outside, no taunting curses hurled angrily. Such sounds might have been drowned by the wild noises in the barn. But not gunfire. He'd have heard

that sharper report above anything else. There simply hadn't been any.

They struggled toward the yawning side door, Emerson in the lead, dragging their fighting, wheezing horses. Haley, waiting for them, shouted at them as they staggered out of the blazing barn.

"We'll make it! You've got eight of 'em out. Only two more to go, Al!"

Emerson gasped, "Yeah. *We'll* make it okay. Ain't what's worryin' me now."

He turned the horse over to Haley, and plunged back into the barn. Castor turned his horse over to the next man and followed Emerson.

The roof of the barn was falling in when they led out the last of the horses. Flying sparks and embers had singed the hair on the animals, had burned holes in the men's clothes. The smell of charred hair and wool was rank in the air. Emerson and Castor were drenched in sweat and half exhausted, but neither of them was thinking much about that. Their minds were too busy.

Emerson said, mopping his soot-blackened face, "Damn it, Gill! Somethin' queer about this! All that loud-mouthed brag from Chuck. Ain't heard from 'em since. They fired that one shot—set torch to the barn—then quit! Crazy!"

"Like a fox!" Castor croaked. "Up to somethin'!"

"But what the hell they up to?"

"We'll find out!"

They had left the barn behind, at a run, dragging the last two of the horses toward the farther grove. Emerson squinted through the night with smarting eyes. "Mark and Doc and Hap are gettin' the nags into the corral. But where's the rest of 'em? What's become of Blaze and Irv and Curt, and the others?"

Castor said grimly, "We'll find that out, too!" He stuffed back into his pocket his sodden bandanna. "Hell, I don't like this. It's quiet as the grave around here."

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Emerson stared back at the crumbling timbers of the burning barn. "They could have lit that fire and got us all tied up here—while they went and pulled somethin' worse somewheres else."

Castor snorted, "Hell! What could they pull worse'n this? Decoy Blaze and the boys off with that one shot, into an ambush and mow 'em down? Hell, they wouldn't ketch Blaze on a simple trick like that, Al!"

BOTH men slowed to a halt as they reached the edge of the farther grove, and out of the grove emerged Blaze and Curt, abreast, with Irv Mackey and the other three men bringing up the rear.

Emerson said sharply, "Where the hell have you been?"

Farragut snapped, "We been looking for that damned Rafter G outfit. Couldn't find hide or hair of 'em."

Castor gaped. "You mean they skipped?"

Farragut said, "Cleared out to the last man, without a yip out of any of 'em."

Mackey said slowly, "And of all the damn fool things I ever heard of, that takes the gold-plated horseshoe! What about them boys you're supposed to have planted in the enemy camp, Blaze?"

Farragut said, "I don't know. I don't know what to make of it at all. I'm as puzzled as you are."

Oliver said, "It just don't make no sense, Blaze. All they done was fire that one shot and burn down the barn. They ain't touched another thing."

Farragut said, "I tell you, I don't understand it no more than you do."

Emerson started across the yard. "Well, let's go check at the house and see if everything's all right there."

Farragut said, "If it hadn't been, we'd have heard from Willy. He was armed. He'd obey orders to fire a distress signal before he made another move, in case the house was molested. We didn't hear any shots from the house."

Emerson stopped, frowning, looking back at the barn. "Yeah. That's right. I forgot about that. We'd have heard."

Farragut said, "And Willy's as dependable—" Then he cut the sentence in two, and stood rigid, head thrust forward, staring toward the house.

Emerson, glancing at him, said, "What the hell!" And turned to see what Farragut was looking at.

In the big front room of the ranch house the lights were on, as they had been all evening. As the men had been walking toward the house in turning away from the grove, the big casement window at the end of the front room had now come into view. It had been out of their range from the barn, or from the groves near the barn. All of them could see it now. All of them became aware of the consternation in Farragut as they saw what he saw.

The big window wasn't there any more. It had been broken out, all of the many small panes and the cross bars alike. Only a yawning hole in the wall showed where the window had been.

Blaze shouted, "Loreena!" and started toward the house at a run.

Emerson, at Farragut's heels, shouted to Castor, "That's the somethin' worse they pulled, while we was tied up at the barn."

THEY headed for the back porch and the kitchen door; it was quicker that way. The kitchen, where Willy Yeager had been left on guard, was empty. They charged on through the kitchen, the hall, and into the long living room where the window had been broken away.

Willy Yeager lay just inside the door, his outflung hand still gripping an unfired gun. His head had been crushed in. He had been dead for half an hour or more.

Farragut swerved violently to keep from stepping on the cook's body, lunging past the dead man toward the center of the room, where Loreena was crouched, tied into a chair, a gag crammed into her mouth, her eyes wide and wild with terror.

There was no sign of Jay anywhere. The logs of a cabin the boy had been building with his toy logs lay scattered on the rug.

Farragut bent over Loreena, whipped the gag from her mouth and began to slash the bonds free.

She said thickly, "They got Jay."

Emerson and the other hands crowded close behind Farragut. The foreman said, "Yeah. We can see. They smashed in the window, you yelled and Willy came running, as per orders. But out there in all that racket around the barn, we couldn't hear. How many of 'em?"

Loreena said numbly, "Four. Three bearded. One horsy-faced, shaved."

Mackey said, "Chuck Gloster. And where were *your* men while all this was goin' on, Blaze?"

Blaze said, slicing away the last of Loreena's bonds, "I don't know. I don't know nothin'! We had plans. Somethin's shot 'em all to hell!"

Oliver said, "They was even too smart to shoot Willy. We *would* have heard that. But a gun barrel crackin' a man's skull don't make much noise."

Loreena shuddered, staring down at the dead cook. "Don't! Poor Willy. He didn't have a chance. They came through the window. I started to scream. One of them hit me. One snatched Jay. The other two waited for Willy, one on either side of the door. They took Jay. You've got to do something about Jay."

Emerson drew a long sigh. "Well, I guess that's tore it. All along, I been willin' to believe in you, Blaze; willin' to believe you was loyal to the Lazy H, that you really *had* some men planted on the Rafter G. Maybe you have. Maybe you're square. Maybe, in spite of all this, you could prove yourself, if there was time. But we ain't got time. We got to move. Them buzzards done the one thing to make sure we *would* move, when they took Jay."

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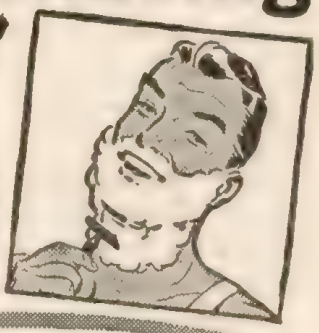

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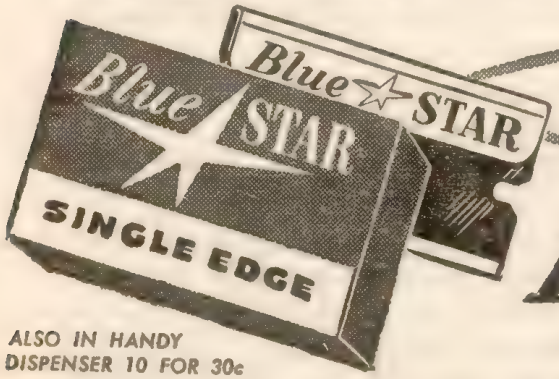

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Farragut backed away from Loreena's chair, seeing the men draw into a belligerent group, ready to back any play Emerson might make. He said evenly, "This feud would have ended years ago, if it had been left to the Hulls. The Glosters wouldn't let it end. Any time the Hulls swore to grit their teeth, take the punishment and not hit back, the Glosters did just what they've done now: they pulled something so bad the Hulls simply *had* to hit back. That's the way this feud has gone on living, Al. The Glosters wouldn't let it die."

Emerson laughed harshly. "You think we don't know that? Why you think we been sittin' here like crows on a fence, waitin' for Chuck Gloster to show up, fingers crossed and guns oiled? Chuck's just runnin' true to form. You think we're goin' to let him go on livin' and breed more Glosters to keep on slaughterin' Hulls?"

Farragut said, "You boys go raring right over there now, there probably *won't* be a Hull, or a Hull cowhand, left alive by morning. They'll have a foolproof ambush waiting."

Emerson laughed again. "Hell, you think we can let that stop us?"

Farragut said, "No. I aim to stop you. I told you, for Loreena's sake, I came here to polish off this crazy feud. But you can't do it by barging over there now."

Curt Oliver moved close to the edge of the group, and Mark Haley hugged close to Oliver's right elbow. Haley said, "This whole damn thing looks a little too phony to suit me. We got our work cut out for us this night. And we ain't takin' no interference from you."

Oliver said, "*You* aim to stop us! That's a laugh. Who the hell you think you are?"

Irv Mackey said, "Grab him and hogtie him now, before he gets a chance to foul up proceedin's."

Curt said, "Right!" He made a lunge toward Farragut, Haley and Irv close behind him. The rest of the group made a half move to back up the play.

Oliver snaked out a hand to grip Farragut's arm.

Farragut slapped it away with his left; he brought up his right, open, spread the palm over Curt's face and shoved him violently backward.

Curt stumbled, lost balance, crashed against Haley and went down, hurling Haley to the floor with him. The two of them, a heap of floundering arms and legs, blocked off completely any forward move by Irv Mackey.

Farragut leaped backward, swerving to his right, and heading toward the door.

Gill Castor came weaving from behind Irv Mackey.

Farragut sidestepped him, tripped him headlong to the floor with an outstretched boot toe, and kept going toward the door.

BY THIS time the entire Lazy H crew had roused to the offensive. Doc and Hap charged toward Farragut, crouched, shoulder to shoulder. Farragut dived over them, landed on the rug beyond them, rolled and came swiftly to his feet. He backed toward the big oak library table which stood near the door. On top of the table were a heap of old newspapers and magazines, a few books, and the bronze statue of a running horse.

Curt Oliver had regained his feet. He pulled Haley up with him, with some vague idea of making amends for knocking Haley down. That cleared Irv Mackey's path. Mackey wheeled to aid Doc and Hap. Curt Oliver and Mark Haley were almost on Irv's heels.

Farragut braced himself to stem the onslaught.

All five of them made a concerted lunge for him, Doc in the lead. Farragut chopped out sharply with his right fist, straightening Doc up with a jarring blow. While Doc tottered there, half stunned on his feet, Farragut slammed into him with a shoulder, driving Doc back into Hap and Mackey. Doc and Hap went down hard, and Irv

Mackey sprawled across them. Irv's flailing boots caught Haley painfully across the knees, and Haley collapsed with a groan and a curse.

Oliver pulled himself to a staggering halt, to avoid blundering into the growing dog-pile, stumbled, and stood fighting to maintain his equilibrium.

Farragut had now reached the big heavy library table. He ducked behind it, upended it—sending its load scattering—and jammed it into a barricade across the doorway.

Curt had started to plunge forward again. Magazines, papers and books skittered in every direction. The bronze horse statue tumbled across the rug and whammed against Curt's ankle bone. Curt stopped short with a howl of pain.

The other men had regained their feet. The whole crew had started a concerted attack toward the door. But, like Curt, they too stopped short—as Blaze Farragut stood there erect in the doorway, behind the overturned table, both guns drawn.

Emerson shot a glance at Loreena. All this time she hadn't moved. She hadn't uttered a sound. She did not move now. She crouched there in the chair, watching Farragut with a strange expression in her eyes.

Farragut said curtly, "You're all staying put right here. I promised myself there wouldn't be any more free-for-all gunfights between the Hulls and the Glosters if I could prevent it."

Mackey said, his voice scathing, "What's the matter, Blaze? You wouldn't still be scared of your own shadow, would you?"

Farragut said evenly, "Could be. I'm scared of a lot of things. One of 'em is what those buzzards are liable to do to that kid if we all come roarin' down on 'em like a regiment of cavalry."

Mackay said, "Hell! I never thought of that."

Emerson said, "Somebody's got to get the kid, Blaze."

Farragut snapped in exasperation, "Well, Judas priest! I'm *going* after him as soon as I can talk some sense into you birds!"

Emerson protested, "Alone!"

"Hell, I won't be alone! My boys have got to be around there somewhere!"

Emerson said, "Go ahead, Blaze. We'll stay put. How long?"

"Give me till daybreak. If I'm not back by then, come fogging." Farragut whirled about, holstering his guns, and went plunging down the hall, through the kitchen and out of the house.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Rafter G War

HE WENT across the back yard at a run, past the still-glowing embers of the destroyed barn, and on to the corral where the horses milled restlessly. He stopped by the bars, whistling shrilly, and his big bay turned, shoved through the press of the other animals, and nosed up to the corral fence.

Farragut hauled saddle and bridle from the heap that had been saved out of the barn, let the horse out of the corral, slammed the gear on him, vaulted into the saddle, rode down the lane and cut across country toward the Rafter G.

It was no more than a two-hour ride to the Rafter G buildings; the Rafter G adjoined the Lazy H, but both were big ranches, comprising thousands of acres. Farragut let the bay amble along at an easy pace, making as little noise as possible, listening intently as he rode. The moon was clear and bright, almost at the full, its light so brilliant that the eye could distinguish faint color in the green of trees, the Naples yellow of dried grass, and the intense pink of late summer wild flowers along the way.

At the edge of the wide field that separated the Rafter G ranch buildings from the woods, Farragut reined in the bay and

slid from the saddle. The night was waning already. He could see the clumps of oaks and cottonwoods about house and barn, and the dark bulk of some of the outbuildings. No light showed anywhere. That didn't mean no one was awake and on watch. There probably wasn't a man asleep on the place.

He left the bay tethered in a small clearing close under the wide spread of a large oak tree, and started on afoot, skirting the field and approaching the buildings from the off side. By this route he could reach the bunkhouse without having to reveal himself in the open.

The nearer he drew to the buildings, the more intently he listened, the more sharply he scrutinized the terrane ahead. He could discover no sign or sound of anyone astir.

He did not pause until he finally reached the rear corner of the bunkhouse. There he stopped to listen again. Again he heard nothing. He stood frowning an instant, debating. He decided abruptly on the bold course, moved to the nearest window, tapped on it and called softly, "Travis. Hi, Travis!"

Instantly there was the rustle and thump of movement inside the bunkhouse and the pale oval of a man's face appeared at the window pane. Travis' voice said, "You, Blaze! Who's with you?"

"Nobody. Who's in there? Just our crew?"

"That's all, Blaze."

"Good! Let me in."

"I can't. We're locked in here ourselves, and the windows are all nailed shut on the outside. We've got orders to keep quiet. We got warnin' we try to break out and we get shot." Travis went on to explain rapidly. They hadn't known of the raid on the Lazy H until the others had come back carrying the boy. "They sneaked that, behind our backs. They got wise to us, Blaze. I'm damned if I know how. We didn't know nothin', till they come in with the kid, herded us in here sly and easy, told us where we got off, and locked and nailed us in."

Farragut said, "Overheard some of you talking, probably. It doesn't signify now."

Travis cut in, "Where's the rest of the Lazy H boys?"

"Home, where I left 'em."

Travis said angrily, "You damn fool! You didn't barge over here into this hornets' nest alone!"

Farragut said, "Hell, no. I brought the United States Army with me. Where's Underhill? What have they done with the boy?"

"They're out in the barn, Blaze. Underhill, Jude Newland, Sandy and Duke. They've got the boy with 'em. Link Amboy's out there, too—dead. Jude smacked his head in for not obeyin' orders on the jump. They're all set to clean up on the whole Hull outfit the minute they show."

Farragut said, "Fair enough. When the fight starts, you boys smash out the windows and wade in. Anything new turn up since I was here last?"

Travis laughed. "Nothin' of any importance, Blaze. We heard Underhill and Newland agreeing to whack up the ranch between 'em, once they'd got rid of the Hull menace for good and all. Then they figure to buy up the Lazy H for a song and take that in, too."

Blaze said, "Nice figuring, Travis. You boys lay low and keep your ears open. Be seein' you."

Travis said sharply, "Hey, Blaze! Wait a minute!"

But Farragut was gone, out of sight. The bunkhouse yard lay empty and still in the wash of cold moonlight.

FARRAGUT went swiftly toward the barn, glancing up at the sky as he moved. Already the first streaks of dawn were on the hills. The sun would be above the horizon before the moon was down. Daybreak wasn't far away. He'd probably meet the Lazy H hands coming, on the way

back. He couldn't possibly make it home by dawn now.

The barn came into sight now, but Farragut heard no sound of voices there. Somewhere beyond the big building a mare nickered to her colt. Birds had begun to chitter in the trees. A cock crowed.

Farragut could see a thin slice of light where the barn door was open a little way. He reached the edge of the door before he heard anything from within. Then he caught the sibilance of a savage whisper, too low for him to distinguish words.

He eyed the lighted space where the sliding door was not quite closed. The space was little more than a foot wide. Farragut moved on till he was at the rim of it, leaned his head forward and peered into the barn.

Reed Underhill, Jude Newland, Sandy and Duke were all standing around a lantern set on the floor. Jay was sitting on the floor by the lantern, tied and gagged. Just beyond the boy lay the dead Link.

Underhill was talking in an angry undertone, and his words were easily audible now from where Farragut stood at the edge of the door.

"I said get back up to your post on the roof! Beat it! And stay there till you really see something!"

He was talking to Duke, and Duke answered angrily, protesting at undeserved reproof.

"Damn it, I did see something! I saw a rider. I saw him plenty plain, and he was headed this way."

The horse-faced Newland said contemptuously, "Hell, you came bustin' down here and yappin' about that rider an hour ago. If you really saw any rider, where the hell is he? What's become of him?"

Underhill said, "You just gettin' tired of sittin' up there, Duke? You want Jude to lay you out along of Link, where you can take it easy? Or are you goin' back to the roof?"

Duke said sourly, "Keep your shirt on. I'm goin'." He added truculently, "And I don't give a good damn what you think—I *did* see a rider headed this way, about an hour ago."

Blaze Farragut said through the door opening, "You sure as hell did, fella. Don't any of you make any foolish moves." He bunted the door back along its track with his shoulder. It slid easily aside, and he stepped into the barn, guns drawn.

The four men stared at him, speechless. They were enough of a like breed to think alike. Their reaction was plainly to be read in their eyes: He might get one or two of them—he probably would—but if they all moved fast enough they could mow him down before he did too much damage.

He saw their hands flex to move. He started pulling triggers.

The air in the barn shivered with the crash of exploding shells. Farragut felt a thud against his ribs, low on the right side. He felt his six-shooters leap in his hands. Jude Newland swayed and went down in a grotesque heap, the blue blot of a bullet hole between his eyes. Sandy choked, threw up his hands, and floundered across Newland's legs. He had stopped Farragut's second bullet with his heart.

Duke and Underhill were still on their feet, firing steadily, but the element of surprise, the first chill fear of losing at last, had played hell with their nerves—and their aim went bad.

Farragut felt a searing slash across his cheek as he pulled both triggers for the second time. The thought of failure did not strike at him; he had spent too many years preparing for such a contingency, too many hours learning to shoot flawlessly with both hands, to have any doubt of his capacity to win now. Both his guns belched flame and smoke and lead.

Underhill stumbled wildly, groping, clawing at Duke. They went down together, trying to hold onto each other, wilting limply, falling apart as they struck the floor.

Farragut holstered his guns and started toward the crouching, white-faced boy. He

became conscious of suddenly feeling a little dizzy, of something wet and sticky crawling down his forehead over his right eye. He raised a hand and pushed back his hat. There was a gash in his scalp. He hadn't felt that one when it struck.

He had reached the boy now, and he went down on one knee, opened his pocket knife and cut away bonds and gag. He slid the knife back into his pocket and lifted Jay into his arms. It was all he could do to regain an upright position.

AS HE started toward the door, blinking, trying to keep his senses, he heard the racket of men shouting and windows crashing in the bunkhouse. The boys were coming, but this had all happened too fast for them to get in on the activity.

Farragut looked down into the boy's white face, smiling, putting all his effort into maintaining his pace, keeping his feet and getting outside the barn before he fell.

They had almost reached the door. The boy said one word, in a short gasp, "Horses!"

Farragut stopped and leaned his shoulder against the door casing, and up the road he saw the Lazy H crew come racing toward the head of the lane. He said to the boy, "Yeah. Horses. It's all right. They're our horses. Our boys."

The riders swung into the lane, and he saw that Emerson and Loreena were riding in the lead.

Running from the bunkhouse, Travis and the other fire men with him had reached the edge of the barnyard, guns ready. They slowed to a stop as they saw Farragut emerge from the barn carrying the boy, and saw the Lazy H crew come thundering into the yard.

Farragut leaned perilously, set the boy on the ground, fell flat on his face and rolled over onto his back.

Loreena flung herself off her horse and came running. By the time she reached the boy and caught him up into her arms there wasn't a Lazy H man left in the saddle. They were all grouped behind Loreena, Emerson at their head.

Travis walked up to the barn door, peered in, and turned to face the Lazy H crew. "Four of 'em, he got. Pretty good shootin'."

Loreena stared down at Farragut, and her sight was suddenly blurred by tears. She said bitterly, "I would get some sense in my own head, after it's too late."

Emerson, realizing that she thought Farragut was dead, started to reassure her. Farragut opened his eyes, shook his head faintly, winked at Emerson and closed his eyes again.

Loreena said, "If I could have another chance, I'd marry him like a shot. I wasn't in love with Bert, Al. I was never in love with Bert. I just thought—I just thought I couldn't marry a Gloster." She looked blindly down at Farragut. "You see, he—he's Chuck Gloster."

Emerson blinked.

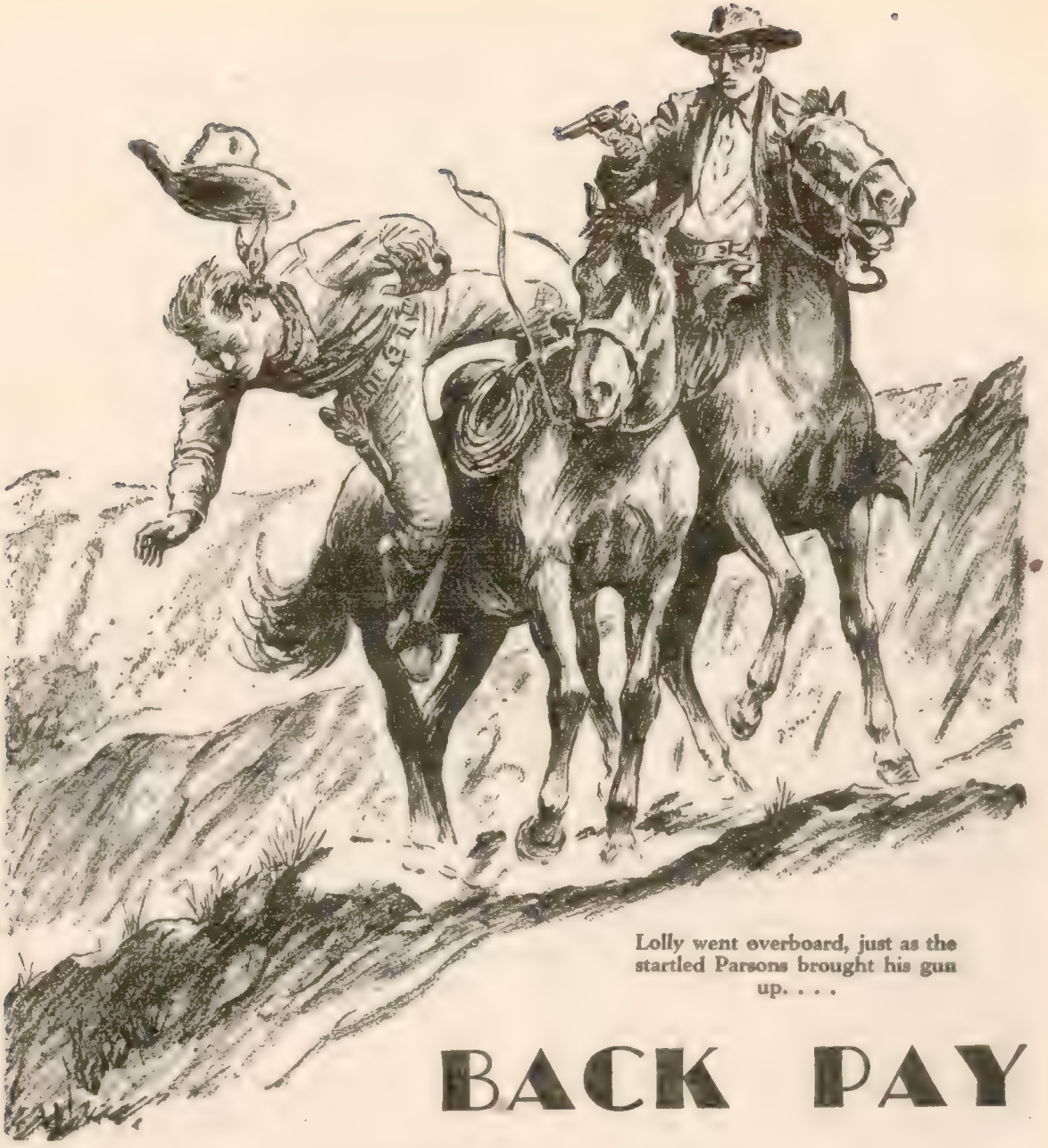
Loreena said, "He is Charles Farragut Gloster. He saw my father, Steve Hull, kill his father, Verne Gloster. It scared the life out of him. The Glosters were all ashamed of him. They sent him away to the Farraguts. If the Farraguts couldn't take it out of him, he'd at least be too far away to disgrace the fighting Glosters."

Emerson said, like a man who was punch drunk, "How the hell did the Farraguts come into it?"

"Mrs. Gloster's cousins on her mother's side." Loreena hugged Jay close, and her voice had grown steadier now. "When Blaze was sent away to Wyoming, Judge Newland was brought to the Rafter G to take Blaze's place and grow up as Chuck Gloster. Jude was a nephew on the Gloster side. Blaze was disowned forever; the Glosters wouldn't have a coward in the ranks. But they didn't want to cut down their fighting force, so they imported Jude."

Emerson glanced curiously at Travis and

(Continued on page 108)



Lolly went overboard, just as the startled Parsons brought his gun up. . . .

BACK PAY

By MARVIN DE VRIES

Lolly Shay had his scruples. He might lift old man Bibber's possessions, but robbing a stage—heck, *that* was stealing!

EXCEPT for those sorry mortals stuck with guarding the various beef herds, nearly every man in Crescent Valley came to Dixie Joe's Place in Tambourine after the roundup. All of them meant to see the elephant in a mild, seemly way at the expense of the herd owners, whom custom obliged to stand treat.

Lolly Shay rode in with Ben Bibber's B B Connected crew, and took a lot of good-natured hurrawing because he rode a mare that looked as if it might foal at any time. He hadn't ridden the animal since the start of the roundup, but now he

was on his way home, and, of course, rode his own property. He had no idea where it had been bred and wouldn't have tolerated such a thing if he had had anything to say about it. A foal could be a very troublesome thing to own, especially for anyone as unsettled as he was.

"You better get her home, Lolly," a puncher told him earnestly. "She's overdue."

"I'm tryin' to," Lolly muttered.

But when they reached town, he stopped off with the rest and went inside. Dixie Joe's Place was crowded, and Dixie Joe himself had half a shine on already. He tended his own bar and made flourishes with the whiskey bottles he handled, showing off to the big guns along the bar. Ben Bibber was one of these, not so big as some, but big enough to be catered to by Dixie Joe. Behind his back, he was sometimes called profane names, but he was good enough, unless he were suddenly touched in the wrong spot.

Lolly hung around the edge of the crowd trying to catch Bibber's eye. He was after his wages. Bibber had hired him for round-up work, and now that the work was finished Bibber's foreman had let him go. Lolly was disappointed, but it was reasonable enough with winter coming on, and he couldn't complain about it. Burt, the foreman, had told him to see Bibber about his wages, and that was what he meant to do before going on to his place beyond Shinbone Ridge.

It was common knowledge that Bibber was tight-fisted. Lolly knew it, and the knowledge made his job harder. He felt too young to tackle him without leave. On the other hand, he felt too old to be shunted around by a man who hid behind his own importance. Besides, his need was much too great.

"Go ahead, Lolly, tackle him," one of Hummert's Anvil punchers prodded him with a wry grin. "He can't any more'n throw you out."

Lolly backed away, surprised and flustered that anyone knew what he was after. He didn't want to make a spectacle of himself, but apparently he was. Hummert, who owned the big Anvil outfit, was watching him, a mixture of amusement and concern showing in his eyes. A stranger at a table away from the crowd was watching and grinning. When Lolly looked at him he motioned him to come over and made him sit down. "What's eating you anyway?" he asked.

IT WAS on the tip of Lolly's tongue to tell him it was none of his business, but he held it back. The man looked kindly disposed, and Lolly thought any question asked in kindness ought to be politely answered. "I'm after my wages," he stated.

"Aren't you a little previous?" the stranger asked. "I understand the beef buyer is coming to town this afternoon. You ought to give him a chance to get his hands on some cash."

"No, they let me go, so I figure I ought to be paid."

"Oh, that's different. You mean to tell me one of them big busters fired you and didn't pay you off?"

Lolly nodded. "He's kinda chinchy. I'll get it."

"What a crook. Let me tell you something, kid. They'll do it every time, if they think they can get away with it. I know. Brace him for it right here and now in the crowd. He won't dare turn you down."

"I'm going to."

"Have a drink first."

"No, thanks. I—I don't rightly care for it." Lolly noticed that Hummert was watching. He was turned sideways to the bar, listening to some talk from his neighbor while his eyes drifted over to the table. When Lolly got up and walked past, he said, "Let it go a while, Lolly. You'll do better later."

"What?"

"You know what I mean. The beef

buyer's coming in on the afternoon stage, and we'll all be in funds by tomorrow. Let it go a few days."

"In a few days, Mr. Hummert, I'll be awful hungry."

"I'll tide you over." He reached for his pocket.

"No, thanks." His face turned red. "I don't mean I'm clear out," he lied.

"Who's your friend?" Hummert tipped his head very slightly toward the table.

Lolly shook his head. "I don't know. I never saw him before."

"Nobody seems to know him."

Lolly considered Mr. Hummert his friend, but he couldn't follow his advice. He was too needy, and this time he pushed forward and got Bibber's attention. "Burt says you won't need me any more, so I'd like to have my wages."

Bibber glanced back. "Don't bother me, boy," he said, in a nettled voice.

"I'd like my wages," Lolly repeated.

Bibber looked again, frowning, as if he were trying to place who Lolly was. "Oh, yeah," he said finally. "Take it up with Burt. He knows the arrangement we made."

"Burt told me to see you."

"You don't have any wages coming, son. You know that. You took the job for your keep."

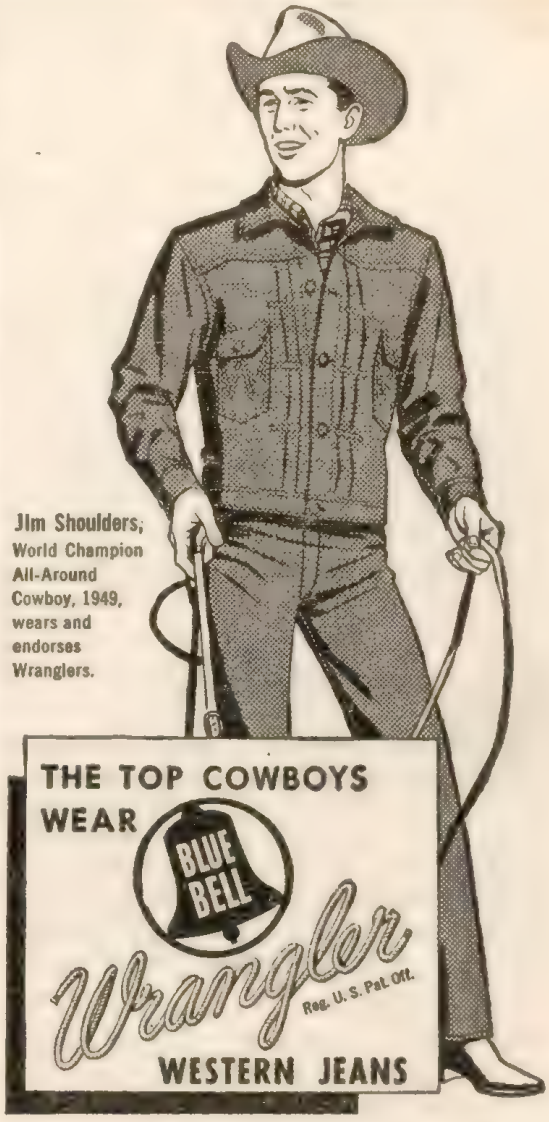
Lolly's eyes bulged. "No, I didn't."

"I don't want to argue, son."

"You said you would give me the job for my keep till I showed you what I could do. After that I was to get wages. In case you didn't care to hire me after the round-up, I was to get wages for what I'd done."

All the stray talk stopped. Bibber glanced up. His eyes moved from friend to friend. A broad grin spread across his face. "What d'you know?" he muttered. "A holdup." He chuckled openly, and turned back to Lolly. "It won't work, son."

"I need the money," Lolly stated, his voice growing strident.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WORLD'S LARGEST PRODUCER OF WORK CLOTHES

"Don't bother me, boy," Bibber repeated, and turned back to his drink. "I don't like to be held up. Now clear out before I lose my temper."

Lolly waited for Hummert to say something. Hummert knew Lolly hadn't agreed to work for his keep at a temporary job, because Hummert himself had offered him one for wages. Lolly had turned it down, or at least had asked Hummert to hold it open until he looked further, because he was looking for a steady place and the deal he had made with Bibber gave him some prospects of one. He knew now, of course, that the steady-job talk was only bait to get free help on the roundup. Hummert knew it, too. Lolly had told him the facts when he finally turned down the temporary job Hummert had offered him.

LOLLY waited a long time, but Hummert didn't speak up, and Lolly didn't call on him. Small change out of his pocket, he thought, but not the truth off his lips. Stick together, you big busters.

All at once, his anger flared clear out of control. He grabbed Bibber by the shoulder, pushed him around and clipped him a hard blow square on the jaw. Bibber went sprawling, clawing for support until he finally lost his balance and landed with a solid thud in the sprinkle of sawdust.

Lolly didn't move, but his eyes raked the crowd, daring any of them to butt in. He thought Burt was going to, but the foreman debated it in his mind and finally held back. Lolly glanced at Hummert and saw his grave look, but refused to let it touch him. This was something that had been building up inside of him a long time and he was glad he had exploded. Maybe he should have done it long ago, instead of letting people ride over him because he was a poverty kid from nowhere. A burst of words came to his lips, but he pushed them back, knowing he wasn't thinking straight. Anything he said now would only make matters worse.

Bibber pushed himself off the floor and brushed the sawdust off his clothes. His jaw looked sprung, and he wiggled it back and forth with his hand. For a second, Lolly thought Bibber would cut loose with a gun, but the rancher wasn't armed. Lolly hadn't noticed it before. As a matter of fact, Bibber didn't give Lolly another look, but his eyes found his ramrod, and he said, "Burt, get that boy out of here. I don't want to hurt him, but I don't want him around any more. Tell him to get clear out of the country."

Burt was big and lanky and sour-looking. He poked his thumb at the door and said, "Out."

Lolly stayed where he was, making Burt take hold of him and put him out.

"I guess I'll never learn," Bibber muttered ruefully, as Lolly was getting walked out. "I did feel sorry for the kid. I always have, but I reckon he's plain no good. You would think he'd feel some obligation for all I've done for him, but not that kind." He sounded as if he regretted all this.

"You know what the agreement was," Lolly told Burt.

"I don't know nothin'," Burt said, and gave Lolly a hard shove outside. "Clear out an' don't come back. You're cooked around here."

Lolly didn't need to be told. Even Hummert stood against him. But he didn't intend to go. He couldn't, not on a mare that was heavy with foal and too short-winded to climb a rut without making work of it. "I'll never get that cash now," he told himself, and all the obvious consequences of that plain fact made a dead weight on his shoulders. "Not even a blessed solitary thing to eat an' no way to get it, unless I take up rustling an' get caught at it an' get hung. They'd like that."

Bibber's horse stood at the hitchrack beside Burt's. I ought to take it, he thought. That would square us. He kept on moving, but before he got past he caught sight of Bibber's gun and holster hanging from the

saddle horn. That was something that would square six weeks work, and a little to spare, perhaps. He stepped off the boardwalk, lifted the weapon and belt off the horn and strapped it on. A small wry grin creased his lips, but he was still boiling inside. "We'll see how he likes getting trimmed out of something," he muttered, and moved on.

He mounted his own bloated mare in front of the town restaurant, and the smell of meat frying made him hungry. "Just because I don't have money to buy it," he told himself somberly, and wondered what he actually would do when he began to feel the pinch.

He headed out of town at a walk, following the stage road toward Custer Springs. He had a long ride ahead of him to get home, but he couldn't hurry and saw nothing much to hurry for. The place he called home belonged to a freighter who had offered him its use when he had nowhere better to go. That was three years ago when he was fourteen. It was a sorry place beside a small creek on the far side of Shinbone Ridge. The freighter hadn't shown up once in the three years Lolly had been fending for himself.

LOLLY got a short distance past the old Fertig Station, a 'dobe ruin of the old days, when the man who had been sitting at the table in Dixie Joe's caught up with him. "Well, they gave you the full treatment, didn't they, bud?" he remarked, slowing down.

Lolly nodded glumly. "I'm glad I popped him one."

"My name's—uh—Parsons. Lew Parsons."

Lolly mentioned his own and said he was glad to make his acquaintance.

"The only way to even a score like that, Lolly, is to hit 'em where it hurts, right in the pocketbook."

"I'm even," Lolly said, patting the gun.

"Yeah, I saw you grab it," Parsons said. "But you won't get much for it. How would you like a job, bud?"

"Okay, if it's got some pay hooked on. I've been wrangling horses for six weeks for nothin'."

"It's got pay," Parsons promised. "A hundred bucks, and it'll take about six minutes." He reached in his pocket and got out some crumpled bills. They looked like whoppers to Lolly, tens and twenties. "There you are. Pay in advance. I'm no Bibber."

Lolly didn't touch them. "What do I do?" he asked suspiciously.

"Something easy. I'll show you when we get there."

"It sounds crooked to me."

"Wouldn't you like that?"

"No."

"You're all through being choosy, kid, once you pull something like that." He pointed at Bibber's gun. "That puts you over the hill."

"Oh, no, I only—"

"I know, kid. I could turn you in myself and get a pat on the back from the law-dog. You want to serve a stretch?"

"No."

Shinbone Ridge made a tumbled barrier ahead of them, splitting Crescent Valley in two. The road they were on crossed over through Snake Gap. This was the steep side, and a series of switchbacks led up to the top. The stage company had blasted out some rock at the top to make it safer and easier on the horses. Out of a long silence, in which Lolly had begun to feel his way to the truth, he said, "You aimin' to hold up the stage up there?"

Parsons laughed. "You aren't dumb, are you? Don't tell me I look like an outlaw."

"I can't figure anything else that would be worth a hundred dollars. But I can't go along with you on it."

"You know the driver of the stage?" Parsons went on.

Lolly nodded. "I meet him every once

in a while on the road. His name's Charlie Fox."

"Does he have a gun-guard?"

"Sure, when he's got cash aboard."

"I've been back and forth between here and Custer Springs several times in the last few days. One day I rode the stage, and I notice he goes hell-kitin' through the Gap."

"Yeah. He usually breathes his team back a piece and then turns 'em loose."

"He'll break his neck some time on those switchbacks. Anyway, the only place to jump that outfit is up there in the Gap, but he goes too damned fast to slow him down."

"He does it a-purpose. He's been held up before."

"We could throw a rock in the road, but he's a cagey old buzzard and he'd smell a rat in a minute. He watches a mile ahead of himself. He knows you, doesn't he?"

Lolly nodded, grudgingly. "He gives me a ride now and then."

"That's it then. I'll plant you in the middle of the road up there. Your mare got winded on the climb, see, and you can't budge her. It's too narrow up there to get past, but, because it's you, he'll drive up right under our guns. You'll be just as surprised as anybody when things start to pop, and you'll be awful sorry when it's all over, but you just couldn't help yourself." Parsons chuckled briefly. "And if you don't play it right you'll be awful sorry, too. I figure that beef buyer they're all waiting for back there is carrying about fifty thousand in cash and currency, wouldn't you say?"

"I wouldn't know," Lolly mumbled.

"I've got a passenger planted aboard to take care of the buyer and the cash. My partner and I can take care of Charlie and the guard from cover."

"It sure sounds like you got 'er made," Lolly remarked. "What's your man in the coach going to do after he grabs the cash?"

"I've got a spare horse up there for him."

"Where's your partner?"

"He's up there waiting."

"It sure sounds like you got 'er made," Lolly muttered again.

HE FELT bewildered. He asked questions to gain time, but he didn't like the quick answers he got. It put him in a tight he didn't know how to wiggle out of. In spite of what Lolly had told this smooth-talking outlaw, he still seemed to think he was perfectly willing to play along. He was mistaken about that, mistaken or something still worse. He probably wouldn't let Lolly back away from it if he tried, not after all this talk. But Lolly meant to try.

He meant to hold steady to what had brought his outrage against Bibber to such a hot pitch; in spite of ridicule and the close shadow of hunger, in spite of Bibber's tricky ways and Burt's shabby compromises with his job, in spite of Hummert's reproving silence, he had his way of looking at right and wrong and knew which was which. And, in ways and places he could see or measure now, he thought the one would fetch a shoddy price, while the other, at odd and uncalculated times, would make its own bright pattern. Better men than he had said so unnumbered times.

As far as he could see, he would be better off if he went through with it. A hundred dollars would be a God-send to him right now, but he wasn't going through with it, and had to bring it to an end somehow.

They started up the first switchback to Shinbone Ridge. Parsons, significantly, dropped back, and Lolly took the lead. The horses made a loud clatter going up the slant into the trenched road. The small-hoofed mare, with a show of mild reproach, struggled on, like a fat lady on stilts.

"If you had a horse that could go, you could throw in with us for good," Parsons suggested. "How does that sound?"

Lolly didn't answer, and his silence

meant something to Parsons. He pushed up alongside with his first show of exasperation and said, "Here's that cash."

Lolly shook his head and spoke up, his voice shaky but stubborn: "No, I'm not going through with it."

"You're too late for that kind of talk, kid," Parsons told him threateningly. "Go on, get up there."

"The only thing I'll do up there is warn Charlie."

"One wrong word out of you and you'll be a dead duck. You can see that, for Pete's sake. That's final. I don't like to—"

Lolly went overboard, on the far side of his horse, over the edge of the road, and down the slant. Parsons' gun snapped viciously. Lolly's leg got a hard jolt that numbed it from his toes to his knee. The slant was long and steep and rock clattered down behind him. Parson's gun poured lead. A slug hit a rock under his hand and screamed away. Far down the slant he came to a sudden halt and swiveled behind a rock. The dust he had raised drifted off. He felt numb and beaten all over, but his leg felt the worst. He looked it over, and finally grinned bleakly. He hadn't been hurt, but the heel of his boot had been shot off. He glanced up and saw his mare looking over the edge where he had left it.

Parsons had disappeared, but Lolly watched higher up and saw him briefly, moving around another switchback. Only his head and shoulders showed. Lolly took a shot, steadying his hand on the rock. Parsons' hat jumped into the air, and Parsons ducked. Lolly didn't see him again.

Concerned about Charlie and the bogus passenger Parsons had planted in the coach, he tried to work his way back up the slant. From what he knew of the stage schedule, there wasn't much time left. A horse came clattering down the switchbacks on a dead run, and he thought his mare had deserted him, but when he reached the top it was still waiting for him. He didn't try to mount, but took the reins and pulled and hauled.

BEYOND the next turn, he saw Parsons. He was lying flat on his back in the road, and a stream of blood was seeping out of a hole in his head. He hadn't ducked then, when his hat flew off his head, and it had been his horse making tracks down the hill. You wouldn't think it of me, Lolly thought bleakly, and stepped gingerly around the sprawled figure.

The road narrowed noticeably beyond this point, but it wasn't so steep. Rock had been blasted out to make the road, leaving a wall on one side and a drop-off on the other. Beyond the wall, the ground slanted still higher and was covered with tumbled rocks, but the wall itself began to play out, coming only to his waist. He worried about Parsons' partner, bushed up among the rocks, but he had to run the gauntlet. He lifted Bibber's gun out of the holster and held it in his hand. Leaving the mare, he moved forward in a low crouch. A vague numbness still made his leg drag, and he had to watch it, or the knee buckled. He heard the clatter of wheels ahead, then Charlie's sudden high-pitched yip sending the team up the slant.

A sudden shot raised its wild bicker among the rocks, and Lolly ducked, but he kept going on hands and knees. A man yelped, and a bullet screamed overhead. Several shots in a quick drumroll spat and fumed among the rocks. Lolly didn't know what was going on. It didn't sound as if all that lead was meant for him. "Watch it," somebody yelled. "He's moving."

It sounded like Bibber, and he got an answer that sounded like Hummert, but Lolly discounted all this. He knew his nerves were playing tricks. A dribble of talus poured down on him. Then, dead ahead, and less than five feet away, a man slid over the ledge and dropped to the road. The minute he landed, he saw Lolly. His jaw dropped and his eyes bulged. "Don't shoot, don't shoot," he breathed, and his hands started to go up. Then, suddenly, his gun whipped sideways and

slashed down. Lolly lurched away from the wall and fired. He rolled until his shoulder went over the edge. Smoke and dust stung his nose. The other man braced himself against the ledge, trying to get off another shot, but before he could manage it his head tipped forward and he pitched to the ground.

Lolly got up and ran forward. The stage had come to a halt. It was standing on the spot where Charlie usually gave his team a breather. Charlie and the gun-guard were coming his way on foot, moving warily.

"What's going on up there, Lolly?" Charlie called.

"Watch it behind you," Lolly called, pointing.

Charlie glanced back at the two passengers standing on the ground, near the coach, but the gun-guard didn't. He kept his eye on Lolly, and suddenly Lolly didn't have any time left to make explanations.

According to Parsons, his plant in the coach was to take care of the beef buyer and the cash, while Parsons and his partner took care of Charlie and the gun-guard. But Lolly didn't know which was which. He didn't know until one of them stepped back and jammed his gun into the other's back.

It was a risky shot, and put a lump of dread and anxiety in his throat, but the right man went down. The buyer glanced back and lifted his hand to his forehead with a dazed motion. He started to move to one side, as if to get out of reach of another shot, but he didn't move far. All at once he froze in his tracks, raised both hands high and screeched, "Don't shoot—don't shoot!"

He was yelling at the gun-guard, but he was too late. The gun-guard fired and he didn't miss. The bullet hit Lolly like the kick of a horse and flung him to the ground.

IT WAS a hard, staggering blow that left him limp and helpless. He couldn't open hi seyes, but he was still conscious, and he could hear the spatter of talk around him. He heard the gun-guard call him names and he heard Hummert's voice, and Ben Bibber's. Hummert said he had been watching the stranger in Dixie Joe's, and had seen him ride out. He had mentioned his suspicions to Bibber, and the two of them had circled around and climbed Shinbone on foot, coming in from behind just in case Charlie might need some help. "That little stinker," the gun-guard sounded off again, "poppin' a passenger like that."

Lolly heard the beef buyer join them. He was completely out of breath, and couldn't make a start on what he wanted to say. When he finally did, Charlie scared it out of him again with an excited yammer of his own. "My God, boys, give me a hand here," was what Charlie said. "That mare's going to foal right here and now."

That was the last Lolly heard.

A long time later, he got his eyes open and looked around. He was under shelter, so he looked at the window expecting to see prison bars, but there weren't any. It was a sunshiny day, but there was snow on the ground. Looking further, he saw his mare out in the yard. It looked slim as an eel again, and a colt pranced around beside it, the prettiest colt Lolly had ever seen. "I wonder where on earth I am," he muttered to himself, and fell asleep again.

He found out later he was at Hummert's place, and that he had been there a solid month. Hummert couldn't tell what all had been wrong with him, but he said it was plenty. "We weren't sure you would pull through. But we prayed a little and fussed a little, and it looks like it did the business. That shot just about turned you inside out."

"That's what it felt like when it hit. Why ain't I in jail?"

"One of those crooks you shot lived a while and spilled the beans. You really went on the warpath, didn't you?"

"I was mad at everybody including you, Mr. Hummert."

Hummert sat down. "For what I didn't say in Dixie Joe's, eh?"

Lolly nodded. "I thought you ought to speak up. That made me madder than Bibber did. I looked up to you."

"I had that jigger at the table on my mind. Besides, Lolly, a man can't jump down another man's throat and pull out the right words. Time takes care of a lot of things like that if you give it a chance The rest of us made up a purse for your pay."

"Bibber ought to like that."

"I doubt it. I let him see what we were doing, but he wasn't asked to help. When he offered, he was refused."

Lolly thought that over, a perplexed frown on his face, but he finally said, "I reckon I begin to see what you mean. Where's his gun?"

"He got it back, and didn't let out a peep, either. He never will."

"I guess that catches me up," Lolly said.

"I guess. Except that you've got a considerable sum of reward money coming. Those crooks were all worth cash."

"Is that so?" Lolly breathed.

"And from now on you're on my payroll."

"Jehosaphat," Lolly gasped. He had to turn away to hide his feeling.

Hummert got up to go, but Lolly had one more thing on his mind. In no time at all, as he had seen it happen, his colt would be ready to ride, and he was sure he would cut a better figure than he ever could on a mare. "That's a pretty nice colt out there, isn't it?" he remarked.

"Yeah," Mr. Hummert agreed, "she's all right."

Lolly winced. "She?"

"Yeah—she."

Lolly straightened his face. "I don't know what time could do about that."

"I do—enough time," Mr. Hummert said, and went out chuckling. ● ● ●

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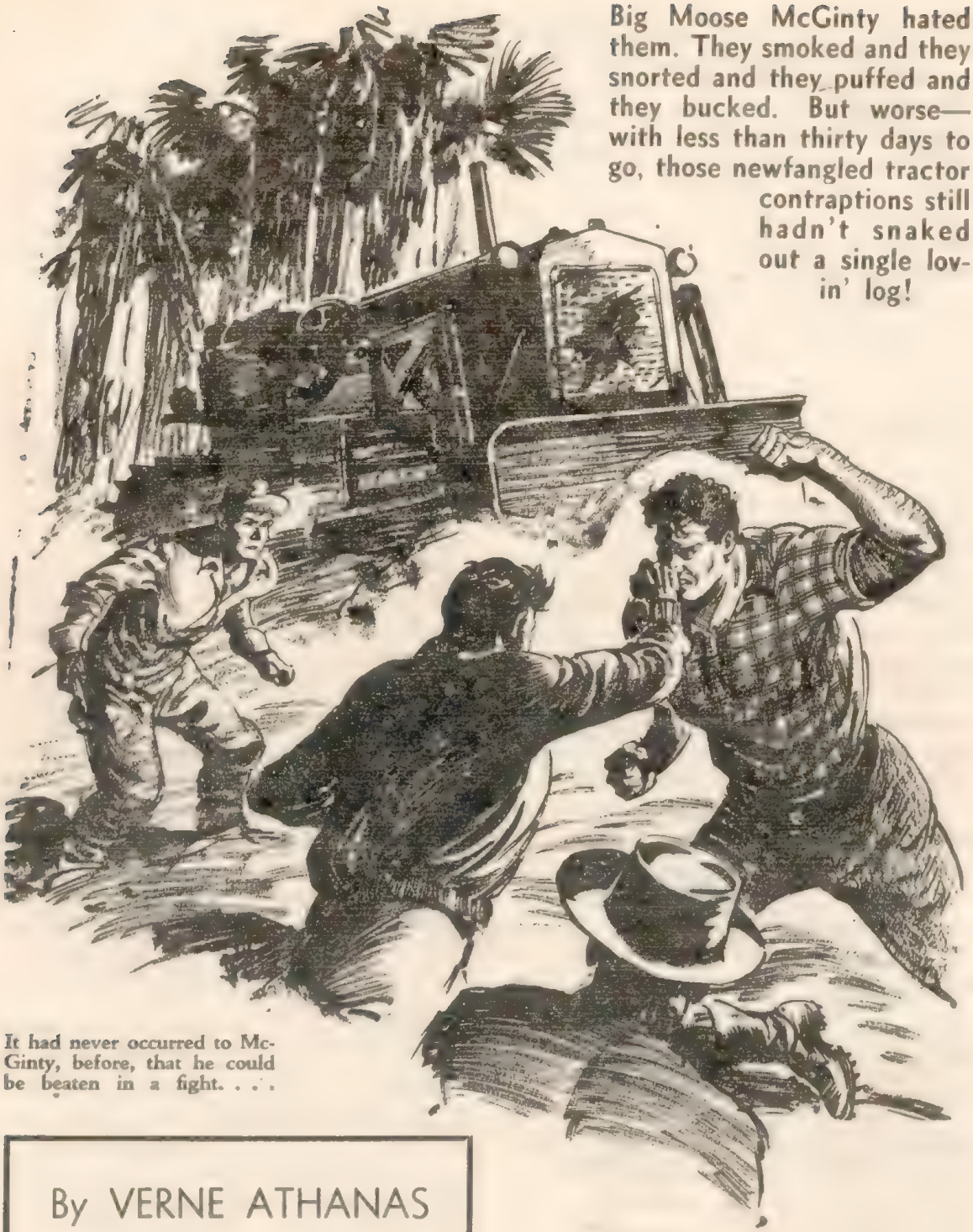

Big Moose McGinty hated them. They smoked and they snorted and they puffed and they bucked. But worse—with less than thirty days to go, those newfangled tractor contraptions still hadn't snaked out a single lovin' log!

It had never occurred to McGinty, before, that he could be beaten in a fight. . . .

By VERNE ATHANAS

UP COMES McGINTY!

MOOSE McGINTY cuffed his shapeless go-to-hell hat far back on his curly black head. He turned his ugly battered face toward Mr. Stevens.

"Now what," he inquired, "is that?"

"That," said Mr. Stevens, "is a cat."

Moose silently strode all the way around

the hulking machine and came back beside his boss.

"I would dearly love," he said in his musical bass voice, "to see ut on a tin roof."

Mr. Stevens snorted bitterly. Moose looked some more.

"What are ye goin' to do with it?" inquired Moose politely.

"I intend to skid logs with it," said Stevens explicity. "What else?"

"I thought maybe," said Moose politely, "they might be usin' ut to drag you away with."

"They? Who?"

"The men with the white coats and the big butterfly net," explained Moose. "You know, the boys from the giggle-factory?"

Mr. Stevens said something short and pungently bitter. Moose grinned.

"We've had our little joke now," said Moose. "Seriously, what are ye goin' to do with yon mechanical monstrosity, Misther Stevens?"

"We'll skid logs with it."

Moose thrust one broomstick-sized forefinger in his ear and waggled it. "It's thim echoes," he said. "I keep hearin' the same silly words, over and over."

"That's enough, Moose," said Mr. Stevens firmly.

Moose looked hurt, a difficult expression for a face like his, but his retort died stillborn as a Model T came racketing up to them and cut its motor with a dying wheeze. The man who stepped over the door and out was dressed like Mr. Stevens in gray-green cruiser coat and pants, and he wore a necktie, too, with the knot snugged into the precise center of his neatly buttoned collar. He came up at a confident swinging stride and said, "It's all set, Mr. Stevens. The other three machines are on the way."

"Good," said Mr. Stevens heartily. "Fine. Tom, I'd like you to meet Moose McGinty. Moose, Tom Collins."

"We've met," said Moose with disarming gentleness. "In fact. the last time I saw the lieutenant, I went from sergeant to private without even touchin' corporal."

The smaller man looked up at Moose with an odd expression.

"Yes," he said. "I think I remember." A thin note that might have been malice came into his tone. "Drunkenness, out of uniform and insubordination, wasn't it? As I recall, you very nearly got a summary court. How are you, McGinty?"

He made no effort to shake hands, and Moose grinned suddenly and wickedly.

"I notice," he said softly, "that yer nose did heal straight, after all."

"Yeah," said Tom Collins. He looked at Moose steadily for a long moment. Then with a gesture that was almost dismissal, he turned back to Mr. Stevens. "I've got operators lined up," he said, "and a mechanic. We're ready to show the yokels how to log."

MOOSE dug his ear with a forefinger again. "Thim damned echoes," he complained.

Stevens said, "Now you just run your horse camp, Moose, and—"

"Horse camp!" said Moose in an outraged voice.

"And the falling and bucking crew," amended Stevens hastily.

"Of course," said Moose graciously. "And now if ye'll but dispose of this bit of nonsense of yon bucket of bolts, let us be linin' up a crew and gittin' on with ut. We'll be needin' hair-pounders and snipers and swampers, and Wally Budd's got some fine horses down to his yard."

"I'm buying no more horses, Moose."

Moose said patiently, "Look, Misther Stevens. This is Moose himself McGinty talking. I'm yer woods boss, remember. I know the timber and I know the White-water country, and while pure modesty forbids me blowin' me own trumpet, 'tis well known that whin Moose McGinty can't do it, nobody can. And I cannot, Misther Stevens, drag the sticks out be meself—at

least not more than one to a time. So do I get me horses, or do we lose the contract?"

"Are you all through?" inquired Mr. Stevens resignedly.

"Depending on the answers I get, yes."

"I am buying no more horses then, Moose. Tom here has convinced me we can yard logs cheaper and faster with the cats. He'll be in charge."

"Me sainted aunt," moaned Moose. "For the cost of yon mechanical monster ye could have bought—"

"You big trained ape," said Mr. Stevens bitterly, "will you shut up? If the good Lord had equipped you with just a mouth and no ears, it would have simplified things. I could just head you in the direction I wanted you to go, and start you with a two-by-four across the backside. I still make the decisions around here, Moose."

"Not mine, ye don't," retorted Moose promptly.

Mr. Stevens stood half a head shorter than Moose. A lean, tough whip of a man with a narrow hawk face, with a neatness that suggested inner discipline rather than primness. He said very quietly now, "Moose, it's been a long time. I'm resigned to a certain amount of your blather. But you'll do the job my way or not at all." The words fell in a dull little pocket of quiet. Moose let his eyes slide from Stevens to Collins, and back again.

"Write 'er out," said Moose grandly. "Gimme me time."

A subtle tautness showed on Mr. Stevens' hawk face. For a long instant he seemed to hesitate, and then he dragged a checkbook from an inner pocket of his cruiser coat and wrote with a violent plunging hand. He ripped the slip carelessly from the book and thrust it at Moose.

In that long moment, Moose almost gave in. Then Stevens' cold eyes swept up and down him, and the big Irishman's jaw jutted forth just a trifle. He took the check without looking at it, carelessly crumpled it and rammed it into his pocket as he wheeled away. Stevens stood with his hand still outstretched for just a fraction of a second, then he too turned, and Tom Collins' gathering grin suddenly wavered. He looked away, and said tentatively, "Well . . ." Stevens said nothing. Moose tramped away without looking back.

STEVENS had said it. It had been a long time. But they'd never come to quite this, despite all their bickering, and there was an inner misery in the hulking body of Moose McGinty that no one would ever see.

At the bank, the teller looked at the check and then back at Moose, and finally murmured, "Just a moment, Mr. McGinty."

A different man came back, a heftier, blander type, who gave Moose the impression that he could smile his same sweet smile while he cut your throat from ear to ear.

"I'm sorry," the man said smilingly now, "but this check is no good."

He turned a rather interesting shade of green, then. Probably because his necktie and neat linen coat lapels and part of his shirt front were all gathered neatly in one of Moose McGinty's large fists. He seemed to be having trouble with his enunciation, too. At least his mouth opened and closed rapidly but soundlessly for some time before he said anything, and then it was only a sort of dying fish noise which made the whole thing rather pointless.

"Eh?" said Moose softly. "Eh?" He relaxed his hold, and the man gasped air.

He massaged his neck tenderly and said hoarsely, "You big gorilla, I'll . . ."

Moose put both hands on the cage and shoved gently. The counter creaked under the strain. "Speak up, man," Moose advised, "else I put this eagle's nest down about yer ears."

"The Stevens account has been impounded," the man said hastily. "There are sight drafts and—"

"Ye mean he's broke," said Moose.

"Well, I can't honor any more . . ."

But Moose McGinty was wheeling away, and the man's voice stopped suddenly as Moose closed the door behind him with a resounding crash.

* * *

"You'll get your money," said Stevens coldly.

Moose McGinty said quietly, "At it again, ain't ye?"

Stevens said, "I've made arrangements. You'll get yours."

Moose toed a chair out and slid into it. He pulled his hat down to rest on his thick black brows and stretched his legs.

"So ye've done it again," he repeated amiably. "Ye've hocked yerself to yer shirt-tail, and ye'd figured that I'd get the sticks out somehow. And thin ye double-cross me with thim perambulatin' chamber pots."

"You're neither crippled nor handcuffed," said Mr. Stevens coldly. "There's the door."

Moose slid deeper into the chair. "I think not, Misther Stevens. I'll stick around. But 'twill cost ye. I'll take double pay if we make it, an' a portion of yer hide if we don't. Whin's the first delivery date?"

Mr. Stevens did not look up from the rough timekeeper's desk. "Thirty days," he said.

Moose said admiringly, "Ye've renewed me old faith in ye, Misther Stevens. Ye did saw the limb off behind ye, after all."

"You go to hell," said Mr. Stevens.

THE limb wasn't only sawed off. It had been lopped so close to the trunk that it was practically healed and barked over.

The Whitewater country was rough. Short steep pitches reared out of narrow canyons without rhyme or reason, with no slope long enough to make a log chute practical. Which was one reason it had gone unlogged this long, for it was a loused-up Molly Hogan of a fouled-off crosshaul, and a heartbreaker for the timberbeast who tried to lay out a profitable show.

Moose McGinty spat on his broad scarred hands and waded into it. His swampers and teamsters and snipers and road monkeys threw up a camp in four days, while the fallers cut their broad swath out toward the first ridge.

The cats arrived on schedule, along with the mountains of fuel drums and oil barrels and buckets of grease. Moose looked at that great stack of badly needed dollars and groaned.

He left Tom Collins strictly alone. The dapper man made a production out of supervising the tuning-up of his metal prima donnas, and Moose went grimly about swamping his skid roads and yarding out the first logs with the teams.

He howled like a trapped wolf when Collins, backed by Stevens, demanded, and got, half of his swampers.

Moose cried in outrage, "Ye said that thim perverted contraptions would git through the brush with the speed of a turpentined tomcat. Now ye're pullin' half me crew to make roads for yer lousy buckets."

"I'm putting them where they'll do the most good," said Stevens shortly.

The cats could pull, all right. When they were working. They bellowed and roared and stuttered and sank, and sent the iron-nerved logging horses shying into the brush in wall-eyed horror every time they passed. When they worked, they pulled three logs to a team's one; but they seemed to show more temperament and fragility than their brutal bulk would indicate. If it wasn't an oil line vibrated loose to spew smoking oil all over the skinner, it was a sapling rammed like a lance through the delicate copper fins and tubes of a radiator.

Collins seemed to be having his troubles with crew too. He fired his first mechanic within a week, and the second one quit profanely on his fourth day. He had a rapid turnover in drivers, too. Collins called them

tractor operators, but the loggers dubbed them cat-skinners.

Collins had put his latest mech to work welding an iron framework of rods to protect the delicate cat radiators, but a six-foot sapling stub had jilpoked itself through and literally disemboweled the intricate copper guts. Moose came by to hear Collins squalling at the swamper with a knife-edged voice, and when the swamper had enough, he dropped his axe and swung in an earnest effort to knock Collins' head loose with his fist.

It got pretty messy. Collins stood a little shorter than the swamper, though not much, and they were about matched for weight. But Collins could box. Even on this rough ground, he walked around the swamper like a cooper around a barrel, and he chopped the man to pieces. It was obvious within a minute that he could cold-cock the swamper at will, but somehow the fight went on and on.

The swamper was staggering now, when Collins' accurate fists straightened him up from each blind rush; the man's face was so much butcher's meat. He fell down finally, not knocked down but played out; and Moose McGinty got a good look at Collins' face.

He didn't like it. Collins' lips were peeled back from his even white teeth in a grin of pure savagery. He looked down at the beaten swamper and said a short dirty phrase and stirred him contemptuously with his toe. Then he retrieved his hat and walked away, hardly mussed, and breathing no harder than if he'd been on a short run. It made Moose a little sick inside. He'd seen that look on a cat's face while it toyed with a crippled mouse.

It wasn't because Collins had whipped the swamper. A timberbeast took his fights where he found them—fought at the drop of a hat and dropped the hat himself, if need be, but he *fought*. He didn't pull his punches to cut a man to ribbons just for the hell of it.

SOMEHOW Moose didn't see Stevens any more, either. Whenever he wanted to consult his boss about something, Stevens was always at the cat shop or out in the brush on the cat side. And Tom Collins was never far off.

They weren't getting the logs out. It was a hard thing to isolate. The horses were working, snaking their drags out to the landings on the skid roads, decking the logs neatly, with pole stickers separating them so that they would not blue in the summer's heat. The cats labored prodigiously when they weren't laid up, but there wasn't the lift, the drive. Moose laid part of it to the heat; man and beast felt that, at six thousand feet of elevation. But it was more than that.

The camp felt the division at the top. Some of them knew, and were sullen about it, that they'd have to wait for their wages. And the rest of them put no real drive in their work. And the end of the first thirty days was looking over their shoulders.

Moose came down one of the skid roads to find another of the cats hulking idle, slewed around where it had thrown a track when an arm-thick limb had jammed between track spine and idler wheel. Moose automatically stepped around the machine, sizing up the damage. They needed every pound of pull they could muster. He hunkered down and looked at the track carefully, and then up at Collins, who was talking to the skinner in a dry, cutting tone.

"Look," said Moose, "why don't ye pull yon pin—"

Collins wheeled to stalk to where Moose knelt. He spoke with a slow and deliberate malice.

"McGinty. Get it through your thick head. I'm running this show. Stick to your side of the job and leave mine alone. When I want advice I'll ask for it, and it won't be from a bone-headed teamster."

For a moment, it was almost a relief. Collins had overstepped himself, and Moose McGinty took that kind of thing from no

man.' He reared up with a sort of warm yearning to take this particular insect apart, and then the complete and bitter unfairness of it struck him.

There'd be no glory in whipping the likes of Collins. He lacked six inches of Moose McGinty's height, and fifty pounds of his heft. Sure he could whip Collins. He could break the man across his knee like a rotten stick, but no matter how it came out, Collins would be the winner. The little man always wins, that way.

If he drops the big man he's a giant-killer and the bigger they come the harder they fall. If he gets whipped, he was overmatched—but he put up a helluva scrap.

Make a mark on the wall for Tom Collins. Moose McGinty walked away from him. But enough was enough. He'd stick it until there were icicles a-foot long in hades, for Stevens. That's the way it was with them. But enough was enough. Stevens could make up his mind. There wasn't a job big enough to hold Moose McGinty and Tom Collins.

THE new mechanic was in the cat shop, hunched over the radiator. He pried gingerly with a thin chisel, groped behind him for a pair of expandable pliers, and with a slow twisting pull, extracted a broken chunk of wood from its socket in the radiator core—a chunk two inches thick and eight inches long. He said resignedly, "There'll be no splicin' these perverted tubes. All I can do is solder the licentious and immoral and suches off, which'll probably make the unprintable illegitimate motor run hot."

Moose grinned. This mech might be a scissorbill grease-monkey, but he spoke the timberbeast vernacular.

Moose stepped over and watched over the man's shoulder. " 'Tis delicate enough, for all its size," he observed.

The mech growled, "These apple-knockers they got herdin' 'em ram 'em around like they was armor-plated. About once more like this, and I'm gonna part somebody's hair with a spanner."

Moose said idly, "Why not fix 'em up with it? There's half a dozen sheets of boiler plate over to the blacksmith shop." He chuckled. "We could be savin' some faller's pay, too. Let 'em batter the sticks down with the cats."

Tom Collins' voice came from the doorway of the shop, and it was a note higher than normal. "McGinty, can't you tend to your own damned business?"

Moose turned and saw Collins and Stevens at the door.

"Me business is runnin' this camp," said Moose quietly enough.

Collins' voice slid up another notch, and he almost squalled, "You've undermined me since the first day I came here, McGinty. It's tickled you to death every time something went wrong, and you've slid trouble my way every chance you got. If those swampers of yours—"

Moose cried in honest amazement, "Are ye daft, man? Me swampers hacked the roads accordin' to yer—"

"All right," said Mr. Stevens. "All right. That's enough."

Then the mechanic's quiet, surprised voice said suddenly, " 'Y gorry, the big ape's got it! It'd work."

Collins wheeled on the man and said "Shut up. You're fired."

The mech said, "Hell I am."

Mr. Stevens said, "What'd work?"

The mech said, "None of your damn business. I quit."

Collins said, "Like hell you do. You're fired."

Mr. Stevens picked up a convenient length of pipe, cocked it over his shoulder like a ball bat and announced, "I'm going to cold-cock the next thus and such that opens his yap."

"I am forced," said Moose in his bass voice, "to concede."

"Now," said Stevens to the mech, "what would work?"

"Boiler plate," said the mechanic. "Like the big feller says. Cut a sheet to cover the radiator."

"Nuts," said Tom Collins. "Cover the radiator and you get no air through it."

"Nuts yourself," retorted the mech vigorously. "Cut holes in it. Little holes, los of 'em, till the damned thing looks like to sieve. But little holes, so nothing thicker'n a pencil'll go through 'em. Space her six inches ahead of the core, and that thin a stick'll be busted before it can punch the core. It'll work, I tell you." The mechanic spat and bent a scowling eye on Collins. "And since I'm fired and quit both, I got more.

"If you'd had the brains God gave a goose, you'd know these machines was built for road jobs and farms and orchards, and they'd need some tinkerin' before they could take the beating in the woods. If you'd had any sense, you'd have got skinners that could find their way out of the brush without a bell to toll 'em out. Now you can take this job and—"

Moose said quietly, "Let me in with me own two cints worth." He looked at Stevens, who still stood with the length of pipe cocked in his fists like Horatio at the bridge.

"Misther Stevens," said Moose distinctly, "whin this lad goes, I go with him. I'll carry it further. I intend to boot yon Collins every step of the way ahead of me to town."

Timberbeasts are a rough-talking breed. But Tom Collins now said the one pungent word that a man uses only when he's ready to fight about it, or when he's the kind of friend that nothing can shake. Moose did not consider Tom Collins a friend.

HE MOVED toward Collins like a stalking cat, and then when Collins was suddenly stepping in to meet him, he thought wonderingly. *The skunk actually wanted me to do this.*

But whys and wherefors went down the sluice. Collins' first slashing blow split his lips and snapped his big curly black head back so viciously his hat fell off. Moose McGinty's big paw didn't even come close as Collins stepped in and out, graceful as a dancer.

It went on for quite a while. Moose McGinty had never been whipped in a stand-up fight; it had never occurred to him that he would, nor had he ever taken a step back in a fight in his life.

He didn't step back now. He kept moving in, and Collins kept slashing, and Moose McGinty's lips ran red where they were pulled back from his big square teeth. Both highboned cheeks were pulped under Collins hard accurate fists; but still he kept coming, and now Collins was setting them up—whipping his fists in with all the spring of bent thighs and twisting shoulders so that each blow was the soggy smash of an axe hitting beef. And still Moose McGinty kept coming.

Then quite suddenly Collins was gasping air through his open mouth, and behind his narrowed measuring squint a light came that was not fighting fire, and he lashed his fists in frantically, whipped them in with knuckles and wrists and elbow in a straight line; and then his back was flat up against the wall, and Moose McGinty's huge hands came out hungrily and gathered him in. Collins squalled shrilly and writhed to bring up a crippling knee which somehow only hit McGinty's heavy thigh.

"Had yer fun?" said Moose in a peculiarly quiet, dispassionate voice. "Shot yer bolt, have ye?"

He was a mess, Moose McGinty. His lower lip was puffed and split, and a cut ran from one mouth corner to fade out in his blue-black jaw. One eye was nearly closed, and his cheeks were hacked raw. But his grin was still wide and white, and his voice still musically gentle.

"Ye've had yer fun," he said. "Now I'll have mine."

He held Collins easily upright with Col-

lins' shirt front gathered in one ham hand, and he brought the other around now in an open-handed slap that snapped Collins' head aside as if it were a handball.

"One," said Moose, "for the green recruit ye stood at attention for four hours in a blizzard, with thim gold didy pins on yer shoulders to make it stick."

Collins gobbled something, and McGinty's broad callused palm smashed the words back in his mouth.

"And one for the swamper ye cut to bits with yer fists, t'other day.

"And one for the lads who took yer foul tongue whin ye called thim out of their names."

Moose McGinty's hands were thick and tough with calluses. Every cuffling slap took a little hide with it, and Tom Collins' head wobbled loosely on his shoulders as Moose suddenly let go and let him stand weaving.

Mr. Stevens cried suddenly, "That's enough, Moose!"

"Not yet, Misther Stevens," said Moose. His big hand came around, still flat and open, and the slap cracked like a pistol shot. Tom Collins toppled over with no more stiffness than a length of dropped chain. "That's for me own satisfaction," said Moose softly.

Collins lay there. He wasn't out. But he didn't try to get up, and Moose looked down at him with a bitter contempt.

"I'd truly thought better of ye," he said. "I thought ye might have more guts than that."

He wheeled away, unable to stomach the sight of the man a moment longer, and turned his battered ugly face at Stevens. "Yon's yer big-shot, highball logger," said Moose through his pulped lips. "I hope ye're happy with him."

Then Moose McGinty turned and tramped out of the shop and off the job.

MOOSE stood at the bar of the River Hog and sent his third straight one down—and might as well have been drinking milk. Which was, after all, something of a novelty. While the bar whiskey at the River Hog was open to discussion as to palatability, there was no doubt as to the potency. Strong men had been known to wind up flat on their backs on no more than two snorts, wondering audibly what had hit them.

Moose took his empty jigger in one outsized hand, surveyed it glumly, and tossed it over his right shoulder. His left paw swept back, caught the little glass blindly, shot it toward the ceiling deftly with thumb and forefinger as a boy might shoot a marble.

"Oscar," said Moose sadly, "ye've been waterin' the stuff again."

Oscar, a large and portly gentleman who was much too smart to argue with his customers or sample his own bar whiskey, simply looked blank and said, "Eh?"

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Moose tossed the glass in the air again, bounced it off his swelling biceps and caught it on the rebound.

"On four of your purest poison," said Moose, "I could do no such feats of prestidigitation. I could not find me own hat with both hands. I could not, in fact," he mused, "even pronounce prestidigitation."

"Eh?" said Oscar again. He had long ago learned that an appearance of doltishness stopped more trouble than his trusty bungstarter. Moose sighed and gave up.

Mr. Stevens' voice said from behind him, "Oscar, would you have a crow—well done?"

Oscar said, "Huh?"

"It seems," said Mr. Stevens, "I've got to eat crow."

"Oh," said Oscar.

Moose simply looked at Mr. Stevens. Stevens had the mechanic with him, and he said now, "Moose, this is Joe Harlan. It appears he's something more than just a greasemonkey. In fact, so this letter he gave me states, he is the field trouble shooter for Mammoth Tractors, *and* a mechanical engineer. He straightened me out on a few things—among them the fact that Tom Collins was milking us both, what with the commission he got from Mammoth and the wages he got from me. So I'm eating crow, Moose. Will you come back and get my logs out for me?"

Moose looked at Joe Harlan, with no visible sign of pleasure. "Do ye think that boiler plate doodad will make 'em work?"

"Let's try it," said Joe promptly.

"Thin let's get on with it," said Moose. He threw a dollar on the bar for Oscar, and they went out.

Oscar picked up the empty shot glass and wiped inside with a fat finger. He tasted the tip of his tongue and shuddered.

"Prestidigitation, hah!" he snorted.

MOOSE swarmed up over the tracks and braced himself on the side seat alongside Joe. It was the first time he had so much as touched one of the monsters, and the steady racking of its vibration bothered him. He clamped one huge paw on a brace as Joe cracked the throttle and pulled in the clutch. Moose swallowed hugely as the machine lurched into motion with a scream and clash of gnashing track plates almost under his feet.

Joe grinned and shouted something and then yanked the cat around on its heels and headed it into a solid wall of brush and saplings. Moose gulped and prepared to join the bird gang.

But before he could get his feet well under him the machine walked into the wall, hesitated, deepened its yammering voice as the governor took hold, and then thrust the wall aside and walked right on through.

For five minutes the cat bucked the brush from every angle, turning, twisting, smashing straight ahead. The perforate boiler-plate nose bulled it aside and the endless treads crushed it underfoot.

Joe swung back and pulled up where Stevens stood. Joe was nodding very quietly, but a wide grin split his face. "It'll do," he said. "And I'd like to take McGinty back to the factory with me to show us how to build woods tractors."

"Me sainted aunt," roared Moose in outrage. "Ye didn't think I messed with these tin horrors 'cause I liked 'em, did ye? No, I did not." He clambered down and his huge calked boot kicked a track plate with a resounding clang.

"Yon stinker," he said, pointing at Mr. Stevens, "Cud not pay me wages. These pots had to produce or I niver got paid. And as soon as I get me wages he can take 'em and—"

"Moose McGinty," howled Mr. Stevens, "you're fired!"

Moose carefully combed his battered black hat down until it rested on his brows.

"I will," he said with dignity, "tell ye meself whin I'm ready to quit, Misther Stevens."

LAWMAN'S HONOR

By
WILLIAM R. COX

"He didn't want me to be an outlaw's woman," she said softly. "That's why he wouldn't take me. . . ."

Anything the Jacksons and Colemans said about George Harper, he had to admit was true. Dishonored his lawman's badge? He sure had! Help his outlaw brother? He sure would! Betray the people of Rondo? If he had to—every time!

THE ROOM behind Miliken's Place was fitted out with a couch and some easy chairs and a few Navajo rugs. There was a calendar on the wall and someone had checked off the days of the month, July, 1874, with a crayon until yesterday, which was Thursday. Outside, a Texas sun beat down on Rondo. There had been a drought and the wind was hot and George Harper moved uneasily, looking from the window to the men in the bar drinking with Miliken. There was another door leading out the rear of the two-storied building and the couch was near that door and the woman sat on the couch.

The woman said, "He had to break out. They were murdering him in there. You know he couldn't stand the lashings."

She was between twenty-five and thirty. She was redhaired, a slim woman in a muslin dress. Her arms were bare and the skin was tanned from riding in the sun. Her face was withdrawn, her eyes slanted up at the corners, staring at him, calculating. She had long eyelashes that fluttered with the intensity of her controlled emotion. Her lips were faintly parted, showing even, white teeth. George Harper could never refrain from looking at her moist, rather full lower lip.

He said, "One more year. He should have made it."

"He couldn't make it. They sent him there unjustly and then the guards beat him. You know that." Her voice became hard. "You're a law officer. Why don't you go in there and arrest the Jacksons? There they stand, drinking with Miliken, free as the birds. Old Confederate soldiers together! That makes it all right. Your brother wasn't in the War, so he was in jail. Is he worse than the Jacksons?"

"No worse. No better." George Harper glanced at the calendar. The star on his vest weighed heavy. Melissa Cortright stirred and the motion of her limbs disturbed him. "Payne should have made it yesterday."

She recrossed her knees, showing one shapely ankle. "I have a stake for him. We'll go to Mexico, start over. Payne will be all right."

"He never liked Mexico." George Harper shook his head. "You oughta wait, Melissa. You oughta let him get settled before you go down there."

He detested the weakness in himself which dictated the words he had just spoken, betraying her hold over him. He turned his face toward the barroom, looking through the partly open door at the men drinking with Miliken.

AT NIGHT she sang in the bar. She was out of nowhere, but she would have gone somewhere if it had not been for Payne. She was a dance hall girl and what else she had been George Harper could guess if he wanted, but he had never cared to.

She said, "If I disappear they'll know. They'll know he's been here. The Tolers are watching out for him. They'd come after us and kill him. You must cover us, George."

He watched the men in the bar. Miliken was chuckling in his beard at something one of the Missourians had said. Frank Jackson was orating, as usual. The three Coleman brothers, Al, Jim and Bob, were big, boisterous men. Joe Jackson stood apart. He was the leader, the dangerous one.

Melissa Cortright followed his glance. "Just because they all fought under Jo Shelby. Miliken, too. They got run out of Missouri until the latest bank robbery blows over and they walk around and laugh and people make much of them. But they put Payne in prison."

He said wearily, "Payne was lucky he didn't hang. Lije Toler got killed in the holdup and the Tolers are powerful hereabouts. Wasn't for me and Darcy, Payne woulda stretched hemp."

She leaned toward him. "You've got to help us, George. You've got to see that we get to the Border."

He stood up, facing her. He was a medium-sized, neat man in dark clothing immaculately cleaned and pressed. He was growing a trifle plump with town living. He had fair hair and pale eyes and a blond mustache clipped straight across his long upper lip. His brows were also light colored, so that he looked mildly surprised at all times. He was acutely aware that alongside Payne he had always seemed an inconsequential figure.

He said, "Payne's my brother. Just don't do anything foolish, Melissa. When

he gets in town I'll probably know it."

He wrenched away from her and went through the door into the bar. Miliken waved to him, intent on something Al Coleman was saying. George Harper paused alongside Joe Jackson.

Frank Jackson, mule-faced, balding, intoned, " 'Thrice-armed is he that hath his quarrel just' . . . "

Jim Coleman consulted an ornate gold watch and Bob asked him, "What time's it say on thet fine super, Jim?"

Joe Jackson shuttled his blue eyes at George Harper. He alone did not touch alcohol or tobacco, standing cautiously apart, narrowly watching everyone through those ever-blinking eyes. He said, "Everything all right, lawman?"

"Depends."

Joe Jackson said, "We'll be leavin' soon. Take the strain off you?"

"No strain on me." George's hand touched his cartridge belt. He had narrow, long hands, quite white and soft since he had quit the range and accepted the job as town marshal. They were always clean and well kept like the rest of him.

Jackson said, "I got no use for a man can't keep his own brother out of the pen."

George nodded gravely. "Couple of your boys up there too, ain't there?"

He walked out of Miliken's quickly, without waiting for the outlaw's reply. His plump cheeks were pinched in, his breath came swiftly, but he moved without haste in the afternoon sunshine. A small boy ran up and said, "The mayor wants you, Marshal."

"Yeah," said George. "Stay away from that saloon, now, Sandy. You know what your maw said."

"Aw, I wanta see the Jacksons. Gee, a feller don't often get to see the Jacksons, does he?"

George Harper shrugged. The outlaws were heroes to older and smarter people than Sandy. There was nothing he could do about that. He let a string of lumber wagons pass, then crossed the street.

Rondo was growing every day. The coming of the railroad had brought prosperity. Forty miles away lay the Rio Grande and the wet-back trade came to Rondo regularly so that swift shipment could forestall discovery by the rightful owners. Times were booming and George Harper had benefitted with the others.

MAYOR DARCY owned the general store. He came out on the porch to greet George, leaning one veined old hand against a stanchion. His eyes were faded but there was shrewdness in them still. He said, "Payne didn't show yet, huh?"

"No. Don't reckon he will."

"The Tolers are lookin' right hard for him. There's a heap of them in town, George."

"They're marryin' folks."

" 'Lection is comin' up, George. Should Payne show, then git away, it wouldn't look good for us. You and me, that is."

"Uh-huh," said George.

"Bad enough we got the Jacksons on us right now. Rondo's gettin' awful respectable lately."

George said, "You want me to run the Jacksons out?"

Darcy grunted. "Shucks, George, I ain't loco. Leave them alone. They'll haul freight for poor old Missouri any day now. They're spendin' their money, that's all."

"Bob Coleman was just flashin' a fine gold watch. A *super* is what they call it. Outlaw lingo." George spat into the dirt of the street. "Wonder where he stole it?"

"In poor old Missouri," chuckled the mayor. "No concern of ourn." He sobered. "George, mebbe you could take a trip until Payne gets clear—or gets nabbed."

"Ain't no place I care to go."

"We-ll." Darcy let go the stanchion. He sighed. "I wouldn't cross you, George. He's your brother. But he was in on that stage holdup and Lije Toler was killed. You and me, we're friends. But the way politics is, I couldn't side you if anything happened."

"You keep runnin' for office, I'll keep doin' my job," said George. He went down the steps and walked toward the Chinaman's. It was too early to eat but he did not want to go to his office at the jail. He felt the lessening of the heat but it was not much help. The town, his life in it, were closing in about him.

Sandy's father, the station agent, came into the restaurant and handed him a code message from Wells Fargo and he put it in his pocket and they played cards for an hour or so, until it was time to open the station for the night train and let the relief telegrapher off.

The sunlight dimmed, the light turned bluish, and dusk came. He fingered the flimsy in his pocket but he still did not want to go to the office, to be reminded that he was an officer of the law. He walked across back lots, picking his way through rubbish, careful of his polished calfskin boots until he was in the rear of Miliken's Place.

There were eight rooms above the saloon, divided by a hallway. Four of them were occupied by the Jackson gang. One was Melissa Cortright's, the other was where George slept. There was an outside stairway. He went past it and entered the door to the downstairs sitting room.

Melissa was gone, but her perfume lingered in the dark room, stronger than the bar odors. He set the door to the barroom ajar. The lamps were lit and some of the Jackson gang were playing poker. Joe stood at the end of the bar as if he had not moved since George last saw him.

Time passed. George slipped the revolver from its holster low on his thigh and twirled the cylinder. He replaced the gun, moved to a chair facing the rear door. It was almost the hour for Melissa to sing, he thought.

The outside door squeaked on its hinges, opened and closed. George did not move, watching the tall, lean figure of the man who stood, bent and questing like an animal at bay.

"That you, George?"

"Uh-huh. Light and rest."

Payne Harper moved to a spot from which he could watch either door. "Thought you'd be here."

"Uh-huh. How you makin' it, bud? You're late."

"Like to never get here. I'm beat." Payne's voice grew stronger. "But I had to make it and I did."

"You shoulda stuck it, bud."

"Couldn't. Not another year. You know how it is when you get in bad up there, George? You know about huggin' the window?"

"They shouldn't have done that," said George slowly. "A man can only take so many lashes and stay proud."

"They like to kill me, George. I thought they would. Man ain't intended to be beat, kept in a cell three by six. They don't feed you, either. Wasn't for what you sent me I woulda died, George."

THERE was a small silence. Then George said, "You got plans?"

"You bet I got plans." Payne's head came up in the dim reflected light from the bar.

"Melissa, huh?"

Payne did not answer. There was a burst of noise from the bar. Frank Jackson's nasal whine arose, "'To what uses do we come at last?'. . ."

Al Coleman's raucous laugh cut across the quotation. Glasses clinked, chips rattled on the table top. The Professor

began playing the tinny piano, a jig-time tune.

George said, "You can't show in town. The Tolers are out after you."

"I won't show."

"Uh-huh. Well—here." George reached into his coat pocket. He had bills folded inside a rubber band. "This'll get you clear. I'd go on through, take a boat at Vera Cruz, hit for Venezuela."

Payne held the money in his hands. The streak of light fell across him. There were deep lines from his nostrils to the corners of his mouth. His dark hair showed a streak of gray beneath the sombrero he wore tilted to one side, rakish as always. He seemed shrunken, older, yet he was still handsome, George thought.

"Thanks, George."

"Try and stay out of trouble. I know it's hard for you. Trouble and you go together, always did." George stopped. It was no use, he knew. He always felt helpless, trying to talk to Payne. The noise in the bar ascended, diminished as the Professor struck a clattering chord.

Melissa began to sing. Her voice was clear but small. Men usually did her the honor of listening in order to enjoy looking at her. Her gown was cut very low and she smiled across the bar, always with her lips parted. She sang *Annie Laurie,* then *Camptown Races.* She sang a Mexican love song.

Payne stirred. George arose and said, "Don't get complicated. Do it the simple way. I got two horses. I'll have them here in a half hour. If you get a start on the Tolers you'll make the Border in two hours easy. Don Garrondo will take care of you. I got him fixed. Keep ridin' south."

The crack of the door to the barroom widened. Melissa came through, shutting it behind her. She gasped once, then flew across the room. She almost touched George, going past him into Payne's arms. He could not see them with the barroom light shut out, but he heard her single sob.

He went out through the back and

around to the street. It was necessary that the Tolers see him going about his accustomed rounds. The town was quiet, possibly too quiet. He checked the saloons and the houses on Railroad Avenue with the shuttered windows and the bank across from Milliken's Place. He idled into the livery stable and for a moment he waited. When he was sure nobody had followed him he doffed his coat and saddled the two horses. The chestnut was a fine animal, but the dun was just good enough for a fast forty-mile run.

He led the pair of cayuses across the back lots, the same route he had taken previously and tied them to a stunted tree. There was no moon and the breeze was little cooler than this afternoon. He stood between the horses for a while, listening, thinking, watching.

Inside him was a question but he refused to consider it. There was only one course of action open to him which he could recognize. Payne was his brother. Once his hand touched the star attached to his shirt. He thought a lot of his job. It was political, to be sure, but he had been a good officer for the town. He refused to think of himself as one acting outside the law.

He heard sounds beyond the back lot. There was a dry stream and a scattering of trees a couple of hundred yards behind Miliken's, a place no one could have any reason to visit at night. He heard the creak of leather and a stone rolling.

He moved quickly, going to the rear door. He opened it and slipped inside. He knew at once the room was empty.

The Professor played *Dixie* and someone let out the Rebel yell. George moved to the door and peered through the crack. Melissa started to sing the chorus.

He stood motionless, thinking about it. Then he turned and went out the back way and around through the alley and into the front door of Miliken's. The Jackson gang had gone. Melissa stood on a small dais which also held the piano. He could see her throat working and beneath the rouge there was pallor in her cheeks.

THERE were two of the Toler clan bucking the faro layout and another at the bar. George bought a drink. He wanted Melissa to see him.

He nodded to Miliken, went out onto the boardwalk. The wind swept down off Mount Espanol with a rush. Dust eddied up in the lamplight. He went back into the alley, running now, making for the arroyo and the clump of trees. When he came to the spot he was puffing from the unaccustomed exertion and annoyed with himself thereat.

He counted six saddle horses. The Kentucky stock of the Jackson gang was unmistakable. The sixth mount was a buckskin, one of Dan Johannsen's. He ran his fingers over the D-J brand on its flank, gathering his wits and his breath.

He went back to Miliken's rear door. Melissa was waiting. Her eyes were in pools of shadow, her hands trembled.

"He won't go to Mexico. He won't take me."

George said, "What's it going to be? Where?"

"He wouldn't take the money. He's different. Jail did something to him. I could smell it on him—the prison."

She was like an empty jar, he thought. It was as if her soul had gone with Payne. She was no good without Payne, she was nothing.

George said, "Tell me where it's going to be."

"I don't know. He said he wouldn't be a man without a country. He said he had as much right to live in the United States as the Jacksons. He talked—wild."

"It's the bank. Only, Macy owns the bank and he's an old Reb." George opened and closed his hands. He mut-

tered, "They spent all their money. Now they got to have more to travel in style back to Missouri . . . . Payne didn't drop a hint of any kind?"

"No. I don't understand." Then she put out her hands in a swift gesture. "Or maybe I do. He's going to join them, the Jacksons?"

George looked at the place on the wall where the calendar hung. "He was here yesterday, wasn't he? He came in and neither of you let me know about it."

"He's going to join them because they come and go and are protected. But he didn't want me to be an outlaw's woman," she said. "He didn't want me to lead that kind of a life."

"There was a couple of that gang in the pen with him. He knew the Jacksons were here. He came in yesterday and joined them. This thing will be a test for him." It was clear enough. He looked at the girl. "I can't let this happen. You know that."

"He hates Mexico," she whispered. "He'll stay with them. He didn't want me to be like Joe Jackson's wife, alone, worried always. That's why he wouldn't take me."

He could smell the perfume. In the half-light he saw that she had come alive again. She had regained belief in Payne and it had rekindled her. He stared at her for a moment. Then he shook his head and went out into the night.

He heard the whistle of the night train as it wound down around Mount Espanol. It was a lost sound, lonely, haunting. He started.

Again he ran. He went into his office, lit the lamp. He opened the iron safe and took out the code book. He spread out the telegram from Wells Fargo and fumbled with the pages of the book.

The whistle came closer. The train picked up speed coming down the grade. He squinted at the scrawled message. Sandy's father wrote a rotten hand, he thought. There was sweat on his plump cheeks.

Three words came clear: "one hundred thousand currency. . ."

He reached for a rifle from the rack. He worked the mechanism, filling the chamber. Payne would know the station routine, every detail of it. Old Norcross was conductor of the night train. The Wells Fargo safe would be in the baggage car.

GEORGE HARPER went out onto the street. Melissa came from the shadows, a scarf over her hair, her hands reaching. "George! If you rouse the town they'll get Payne."

"Go back to Miliken's," he said.

"You can't do it! If he's killed or captured I'll shoot myself, George!"

He said, "You little fool, there's no time for palaver." He shoved her aside. It was increasingly difficult for him to run. He kicked up dust in the street and swallowed it, choking. He ran onto the far end of the platform as the train chuffed in.

He saw Sandy's father come out with the mail sacks, a revolver bumping awkwardly on his hip. He sought cover and found it behind a bale of cotton ready for shipment. He wiped the sweat from his face with a clean handkerchief from his hip pocket. He propped the rifle against the bale and drew his revolver and injected a shell into the one empty chamber.

Brakes screeched and the cars rattled together hideously as the train shuddered to a halt. There were two coaches and the freight and a baggage coach and a tiny caboose. George holstered the revolver and lifted the rifle gently in his slim hands.

He saw the horsemen ride in on a walk. He counted them as they dismounted and strolled toward the baggage room. There were six, but he could not

distinguish Payne from the others. Joe Jackson walked into plain view and spoke to Sandy's father.

They would have to kill the station agent, George knew, because he was brave enough and stupid enough to fight. Old Norcross called cheerily from the coaches. The engine huffed and puffed. The door of the baggage car slammed open. No passenger got off for Rondo. The Wells Fargo man peered from the opened door. He was wearing his guns, so they would have to get him, too.

Joe Jackson lifted his hand to his hat. Frank came, slinking like a wolf, going toward the baggage car. Al Coleman stepped into sight carrying a shotgun. Sandy's father gaped at sight of the weapon.

"Take it easy," said Joe Jackson. "We wouldn't hurt the town. We're only taking Wells Fargo."

Sandy's father yelled and jumped back. The other Jacksons came, drawing weapons. The Wells Fargo man tried to slam the car door. Joe Jackson drew like a magician and shot him.

George touched the trigger of the rifle. Joe Jackson spun and staggered a few steps, then went down, his face still calm, his eyes blinking.

They were fighters and they saw danger and forgot all else, attacking. Frank Jackson and the three Colemans came, shooting at every step. They recognized the bale of cotton as a fort, but they ran toward it, screaming the Rebel yell.

Payne still did not appear. George fired the rifle. He nailed Al Coleman. It was like shooting ducks out of a blind. He dodged around to the other side of the bale.

The Wells Fargo man dangled half out of the car door. The train crew were shouting. Norcross produced a revolver and Frank Jackson wheeled and shot the old man through the head.

George swore fiercely in his throat, aiming at Frank. He missed as the outlaw dodged. A bullet dug splinters at his feet. Lead bit into the cotton. He shifted and fired again.

Bob Coleman wavered, stumbled, then pitched onto his face. Jim was getting in close, a gun in each hand. George fired at him pointblank. Jim doubled over.

Frank Jackson was standing stock still, taking aim. Flame shot up George's left arm. The rifle dropped from his hands.

He dropped his right hand. It came up filled with revolver. He steadied himself against the cotton bale. He saw Sandy's father on his knees, trying to drag out the Colt he wore too high. There was still no sign of Payne.

Frank Jackson's face was demoniac. He held both revolvers low, sending lead at George. One bullet struck George in the side and he spun half around and was spared the second.

He thumbed the revolver. He yanked back the hammer and let it fall again. It seemed that Frank Jackson would never stop coming at him. He fired one last time.

The outlaw dropped both hands. He stood erect, screaming something in his throat about the Philistines. Then his guns hammered on the platform and he slid down and was silent.

VOICES came from every direction. Al Coleman tried to raise his arm and Sandy's father shot him five times in the body. Mayor Darcy ran, waving his arms, bearing an old Navy Colt and uttering futile commands.

"You got them all. It ain't possible, George!"

"From behind a cotton bale?" George snorted. He kept talking because he was not sure about Payne, to gain time. "Put a guard on the car. There's a hundred thousand in it. How they knew—they must have an underground better than the Pin-

kertons. Take off the dead and wounded, Darcy. Get the train on schedule and we'll tot it all up later."

The mayor moved off obediently and George used his rifle as a crutch under his right arm. Doc Carruthers was coming with his little brown bag. He motioned George toward the waiting room. George shook his head, indicating the others who had been hurt. Doc hesitated and George made it into the darkness beyond the station. At the edge of the platform Melissa was waiting, as he had expected.

She stood straight, looking down the road. "He's gone. He went south after all."

"On Johannsen's buckskin?" It would be known that the Jacksons had bought that horse.

"On the chestnut you left for—for us."

"Payne always did know hossflesh," he muttered.

To his embarrassment he sat down hard upon the boardwalk. He could feel the blood leaking from his left side.

The girl did not stir. Her eyes were on the trail south.

George said, "Melissa, it's better you know. Payne never was any good. You can hate me for sayin' it, but even as a button he was a case. Stole money from the cookie jar where mama hid what little she had. When you get over this, mebbe it'll help you to know. I'd never tell you, except it might make you feel better." His head felt strangely light, as though it belonged partly to someone else. "And Melissa—one reason he hated Mexico. He was married down there. Sonora . . . a half-Injun gal. Two kids. She's still there and lookin' for him. He's my brother, Melissa, but Payne never was any good."

His head hit the boards with a cracking sound. Doc Carruthers came racing across the platform, scolding.

Payne would be across the Border and none the wiser. George thought of that, lying in the darkness. He heard Melissa, weeping at last, and knew she was weeping for Payne.

Well, he had kept the nickel-plated star fairly clean, he thought. Doc probed at him and it hurt. The last thing he remembered was the smell of Melissa's perfume.

He let himself drift from consciousness, comforting himself with the knowledge that it would still be there after he awoke. It would, he knew, always be there. • • •

Alone, Ames McAdam rode the midnight trails . . . wanted by the Army as a deserter . . . sought by the kill-pack as a man who knew too much . . . loved by a woman he could never claim.

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STACKED DECK

"Don't move, Carter," J. P. Willouby said. "I'll scramble your guts!"

By
MAX KESLER

Ex-corset drummer J. Percival Willouby had never sold such a tough commodity: a Boothill grave to his enemy!

FATE, aided by a consuming thirst, turned J. Percival Willouby's feet toward the Palmer House and, literally speaking, hurled the chubby little drummer into a game where the cards were stacked—and the price for a crooked hand was death.

Of course, not being psychic, J. Percival Willouby had nō premonition of what lay ahead. However, in his present mood, he would probably have welcomed it anyway. J. P. Willouby was fed up with his dreary existence—a fact which he had made clear by telling his boss to go to hell the day before in Oklahoma City. Nor was his

temper improved after the stifling heat of the day coach from which he had alighted some hours before.

A nervous, high-strung man of forty, he crossed the dusty street toward the Palmer House now with quick, short strides. The humid July afternoon glued his red-and-white-striped silk shirt to his back and wrinkled his seersucker suit into damp, soggy folds. J. P. Willouby swore fluently and mopped his round, perspiring face as he shoved inside the Palmer House lobby.

In that instant, Fate brought him into violent contact with a tall, black-haired youth of twenty-three who was just leaving the place. Although he packed a hundred and seventy pounds of his five-foot-six-inch frame, J. P. Willouby thought for a moment he'd run into a brick wall. He grunted, shook his head to clear it, and glared at the stranger.

"Why don't you watch where you're—" He broke off short, frowning. And then he forgot the heat, his quarrel with William P. Simms, Bosworth, Inc.'s regional manager, and his hatred for his job. For underneath his impatient exterior, J. P. Willouby was a kind little man with a touch of the Good Samaritan in him.

More often than not, his well-meaning efforts got him in hot water. But these frequent scaldings never seemed to teach him a lesson. A man in trouble still needed help. And one look told him that this man was in trouble—the kind that usually ended up in gunsmoke.

The signs were all too clear. Tension stretched the skin tight across the high cheekbones, touched off smoldering fires in the dark eyes, set the generous mouth in an ugly slash and rippled the deep-chested, powerful figure.

An oilman, J. P. Willouby thought, noting the stained overalls and eight-inch driller's boots. Nothing unusual in that. Since the first test well had been brought in here, the Cherokee Strip was beginning to open up like a flower. Wildcatters were pouring into Marlow from all parts of the United States. The Strip had become a gold mine.

That was why William P. Simms, J. P. Willouby's boss, had sent him into this new territory. And why J. P. Willouby had told the regional manager to go to hell, and quit. If a raw, wild country like this ever found out a man was selling ladies' . . . J. P. Willouby shuddered and focused his attention once more upon the stranger.

COMMON sense, plus the memory of past unpleasant experiences, told him to mind his own business. But the grim desperation in the youth's eyes proved too much for him.

"Sorry, mister," he said. "This damned heat's got me blind with thirst. Say, what's the matter? You look sick. Maybe a drink would help. How about having one on me. My name's Willouby."

The big man glared at him. "Look, mister," he said bitterly. "Take your drink and go to hell, will you? I just lost the most promising well in the Cherokee Strip! That weak-kneed banker, Fred Prentiss, foreclosed on me, and Bruce Hemingway gobbled it up. That's the way he's been doing all the little fellows. Putting the pressure on Prentiss to make him call in their loans—then buying up their leases for a song! Only this time, he jumped the wrong man. I'm going to hunt down Hemingway and—" He tapped the .45 at his hip.

"And get your fool head blown off," J. P. Willouby said bluntly. "Look, son, I've been in this town exactly five hours and all I've heard has been Bruce Hemingway. From what I gather, he's a cross between a lobo wolf and a rattlesnake. Not to mention being greased lightning with a gun. You wouldn't have a chance."

The stranger's mouth twisted. "Maybe not," he retorted. "But he'll know that I've tried. No snake is going to freeze me out of my own well!"

He scowled curiously at J. P. Willouby.

"For a man who hit town only a few hours ago, you seem to know a lot about things around here. Just who in hell are you anyway, mister?"

J. P. Willouby gave the wildcatter a wry smile. "Just another drummer," he said. "It's a part of my business to learn all about people when I move into a new territory."

"A drummer, eh?" The oilman said contemptuously. "And just what do you sell?"

J. P. Willouby's face flamed. "Come on," he countered. "I'll buy you a drink, mister— What'd you say your name is?"

"Carl Griffin," the man said. "Let's go."

The Palmer House boasted the finest bar west of the Mississippi. As Griffin led the way to a corner table, J. P. Willouby's eyes ran appreciatively over the rich mahogany bar, the gleaming brass foot rail and the great mirrors. "Quite a place," he said. "Who owns it?"

"A friend of mine," Griffin said bitterly. J. P. Willouby's eyebrows went up.

"What's her name?"

A white-coated waiter came over and Griffin said, "A double bourbon, Pete." J. P. Willouby said he'd have the same.

"How'd you know it was a woman?" Griffin demanded.

A good-natured smile crinkled J. P. Willouby's moon-shaped face. "A man don't say *friend* that way about another man."

Griffin scowled and tossed off his drink. "Tony Marshall played Carter along until he financed her here. Only she's not as smart as she thinks she is. When Carter finds out she's made a fool of him, he'll make trouble." His eyes turned suspicious. "Damn it, why am I spouting off to you anyway?"

"It's always better to spill your troubles to a stranger," J. P. Willouby said. "Go ahead. It will make you feel better."

Griffin stared at him, sullen-faced. "What'd you say your line was, fella?"

A red flush rose to J. P. Willouby's cheeks. "Corsets!" he said bitterly. "Ladies' corsets! Made of genuine baleen—whalebone to you, sir! Uh!"

J. P. Willouby shuddered, gulped down his drink and ordered another round. He paid with a twenty-dollar gold piece. Noting Griffin's sharp glance, he shrugged. "Oh, there's money in it, if you're willing to sell your soul for a piece of whalebone! Me—I've quit!"

GRIFFIN'S eyes gleamed. "You wouldn't maybe be interested in a whirl at oil, would you?" he said. "I know where we can buy a damn good lease. I'd like another crack at Carter!"

He seemed to have forgotten his troubles, for which J. P. Willouby was grateful. He'd taken a liking to Griffin.

"I've thought about it," he admitted. "But with Carter in control, the Strip's not a very good bet. Especially with a hot-headed partner who wants to settle everything with a gun. Besides, I've still got a couple of good sidelines. Saloon gambling equipment and . . ." His face grew very still. He studied Griffin with thoughtful eyes. "Still, I might be interested at that. Tell me—is Bruce Carter a gambling man?"

"He'd gamble on it snowing tomorrow," Griffin said. "Why?"

J. P. Willouby smiled. "I was just thinking," he said. "Why *buy* a well when we can get it for . . ." He stopped and his nails bit into his palms then as a tall, slim man wearing a pearl-gray suit crossed to the bar.

The man's face was dark, almost aquiline. A faint touch of gray showed at his temples. He carried himself with a power-conscious arrogance.

"What's the matter?" Griffin said sharply. "You all right?"

"Yeah." J. P. Willouby's voice was thick. "I'm all right. But don't turn around—Bruce Carter just walked in."

They heard Carter say, "Miss Marshall upstairs, Pete?"

"She said for you to come on up, Mr. Carter," the bartender answered.

"Thanks." Carter made his way upstairs to a second-floor gallery. He did not notice the two men at the far table.

Griffin cursed and shoved back his chair, but J. P. Willouby grabbed his arm before he could move further. "If you're going to talk business with me, stop acting like a child! Go up there now and you'll spoil everything!"

Griffiin's face grew tense with suspicion. "You've been in town less than a day, Willouby," he said. "You've known me about half an hour. Yet you're offering to side me against Carter. Why?"

"Never look a gift horse in the mouth, Griffin," J. P. Willouby said coldly. "Let's just say I've got my reasons."

They measured one another in tight silence, then Griffin wheeled and strode from the room.

J. P. Willouby sat there twirling his glass, his eyes fixed upon the gallery.

OFTEN, men's lives become inextricably tangled without them ever coming face to face. And so it had been with J. Percival Willouby and Bruce Carter. No doubt Carter had long since forgotten—if he had ever given it a serious thought to begin with. But J. P. Willouby had a long memory. And the years had done nothing but sharpen it.

Ten years before, a blonde Venus with a smooth line had taken him for everything he had. A cool seven thousand dollars. When it developed the girl had been merely a clever tool of a man named Bruce Carter, J. P. Willouby had taken a dim view of the matter. He was willing to concede that a good-looking woman could make a fool of him. But not that a *man* could do it.

The next morning, he'd set out to find Carter—and Fate had slipped him another belly punch. A Tidout bartender had discovered the blonde lying in the alley behind his place upon closing. A knife was buried to the hilt in her breast.

An hour later, J. P. Willouby was in jail —charged with the girl's murder. Tidout would not condone the murder even of a chiseling little confidence tramp.

Three things saved J. P. Willouby from hanging. The knife could not be traced to him. Bruce Carter had hurriedly skipped town the night of the killing. And the jury, after one look at J. P. Willouby's round, good-natured face, couldn't conceive of him as a murderer. J. P. Willouby was acquitted.

The Bosworth Corset Company transferred him to a new territory. The notoriety he had received paradoxically boosted J. P. Willouby's prestige. Business boomed—and the double eagles flowed into his pockets.

Yet he did not forget Bruce Carter. He guessed that Carter had killed his blonde accomplice to avoid splitting J. P. Willouby's seven thousand dollars. That seven thousand represented years of sacrifice to J. P. Willouby. Every time he thought about it, he got mad. However, there was nothing he could do about it. He didn't know where Carter had gone—or what he even looked like. Still, he wouldn't quit.

For ten years he sold Bosworth Corsets all over the United States, each year requesting—and getting—a new territory. In every town, he made inquiries about Bruce Carter. But the only answer he ever got was, "Sorry. Never heard of him."

And so it went—with J. P. Willouby growing to hate corsets more and more. Finally, when Simms had transferred him here to the Cherokee Strip, he'd blown his top and quit. And now, ironically, he had found Bruce Carter here—in the one spot he had never expected to find him. . . .

A woman's angry voice snapped J. P. Willouby out of his retrospect. *"And keep away from now on, Bruce!"* A door slammed and Bruce Carter came downstairs, his face chalk-white. Without glancing to right or left, he stalked outside.

J. P. Willouby smiled. So Tony Marshall had give the mighty Carter his walking papers! Admittedly, the girl was a clever opportunist. But then the girl back in Tid-

out had thought she was clever, too. Only she'd ended up in an alley with a knife through her heart.

"Pete!" The woman's voice called now. J. P. Willouby looked up quickly—and caught his breath. Perhaps twenty-three, with olive skin and thick black hair that tumbled down over her shoulders, Tony Marshall had the kind of figure that corset manufacturers hated. Right now, she sounded angry and upset.

The bartender dropped his polishing rag. "Yes, Miss Tony?"

"Pete, has Mr. Griffin been around?"

"He was in about fifteen minutes ago," Pete said. "Talking with the feller over there in the corner."

Tony Marshall swung her dark eyes toward the little drummer.

"You!" she said. "Do you know where he went?"

J. P. Willouby flushed. Then, realizing the girl was upset, he said mildly, "I might. Why not come down and talk it over?"

Tony Marshall's mouth curled. Then, tossing her head, she swept down the stairs.

"All right," she said, dropping into a chair. "Where is he, mister? It's important that I see him."

"I don't think you'd better just now," J. P. Willouby said. He regarded her shrewdly. "You're playing with dynamite, young lady. And it looks to me like you've just lit the fuse that will set it off."

The girl crashed her fist down on the table. "I've no time to waste with a meddling fool! Where is he?"

RED spots appeared in J. P. Willouby's cheeks, but still he spoke mildly. "You've got yourself on a spot with Carter. Now you want Griffin to pull you out of it. You know he'd try because he's in love with you. If he was killed, you wouldn't give a—"

Tony Marshall slapped him—hard. "Pete!" Her voice trembled with fury. "Throw this fat fool out! And then find Mr. Griffin!" She stood up, eyes blazing.

The bartender, a big red-headed man, came from behind the bar and crossed to the table. "All right, buddy," he said and reached for the little drummer.

J. P. Willouby's hand twitched slightly—and a four-barreled Pepperbox bored into Pete's stomach. "I like it here, Pete," he said.

The bartender's breath went out with a sigh. "Far's I'm concerned, mister," he said, "you can sit there till Doomsday!" He turned and started back to the bar.

"You're fired, Pete!" Tony Marshall said. "Pick up your pay in the morning."

Without a word, Pete slipped out of his white jacket. "You're the best boss I ever had, Miss Tony," he said quietly. "But there's a lot worse things than being fired. Four slugs in the belly, say."

Turning, he went outside.

J. P. Willouby slipped the Pepperbox under his coat and said, "You had no right to fire him. You didn't hire him as a gunman."

"I know it." Tony Marshall's shoulders sagged. "And I'll hire him back tomorrow. My temper gets away from me sometimes." She looked him straight in the eyes.

"Sure, I played Bruce into putting me into business," she said. "But I just paid him back the last fifteen hundred dollars I owed him a few minutes ago. Only now he thinks he's entitled to a special kind of interest."

The dark eyes smoldered. "I didn't sell myself for the Palmer House, mister. I worked like a dog for it. *Legitimate* work!"

J. P. Willouby cleared his throat. "I guess I owe you an apology, miss," he said. "I'm afraid I jumped to conclusions."

"Forget it," the girl said. "Right now, I'm upset about Carl. You see, he's been a constant thorn in Carter's side—organizing wildcatters and generally stirring up opposition. Carter finally took over his well. Now he's giving Carl until sunrise to get out of the Strip. I've got to warn Carl."

J. P. Willouby shook his head. "He won't listen," he said. "He's not the kind to run."

The girl lit a cigarette and eyed him suspiciously. "Just who are you anyway? And where do you fit into things?"

J. P. Willouby shrugged. "My name's J. P. Willouby," he said. "I'd never seen Griffin until we bumped into one another an hour ago. He was excited so I asked him to have a drink. When he spilled his trouble to me, I suggested we might work out a deal to get his well back from Carter. Then I sent him away to avoid a fight when Carter came back down. As to where I fit in—let's just say I have an old debt to collect."

He rose, smiling. "Don't worry about young Griffin. If nothing happens, he'll not only have his well back by morning—but Bruce Carter will be finished in the Cherokee Strip!"

"And suppose something does happen?" Tony Marshall said.

J. P. Willouby shrugged. "We'll worry about that when we come to it. Meanwhile, stay away from Griffin. You'd only complicate things."

He left her sitting there, a solitary figure in her ornate bar.

AN IMPATIENT Griffin was awaiting him in his room. The wildcatter whirled nervously as J. P. Willouby entered.

"Where in hell have you been?" he said. "Has Carter gone?"

J. P. Willouby nodded and dropped down on the bed. "I just had a talk with your girl friend. She's worried about you."

"Damn it, you had no right to drag her into this!" Griffin protested angrily. "She's not interested in my problems."

"Isn't she?" J. P. Willouby snapped. "Listen, you fool! The girl's in love with you! She just paid Carter off what she owed him and gave him the boot! And now she's scared for you. Carter has given you until sunrise to clear out of the Strip. What do you intend to do? You got any plans?"

"Do?" Griffin's face was livid with anger. "Hell, I'm going to take care of the snake!"

J. P. Willouby rose. "Then why not do it in a way folks will talk about for the next fifty years?"

Griffin whirled. "Look, Willouby," he said. "You're beginning to get in my hair. Now before I start combing you out—just what the hell are you driving at?"

J. P. Willouby shrugged. "Let's put it this way. Suppose you got in a card game with Bruce Carter. And suppose you not only won back your own well—but broke Carter as well. He couldn't do anything but kill you. And he's going to do that anyway. On the other hand, if you managed to come out of it alive, you'd be the richest man in the Strip.

"And"—he hauled out a thick sheaf of bills—"since I'm going to stake you to the game, I'd end up being your partner. Now here's five thousand for a starter. Another five thousand if you need it. Only you won't."

Griffin stared at the bills in his hand, dazed. "I don't get it," he stammered. "You gambling on my winning a card game against the luckiest man in the Strip! Why?"

J. P. Willouby sat back down on the bed. "I just told you. I want to be a rich man. Or that's part of it. The other reason—Bruce Carter used a girl to take me for seven thousand dollars years ago. Then he murdered the girl. I almost hung for his crime. Now I want that seven thousand back—plus Carter's hide!

"And don't worry about not being a card sharp." He took a deck of cards from his pocket and began riffling them with small, soft hands. "Sometimes a man just can't lose. Come on, sit down while I explain a few things."

* * *

An hour later, J. P. Willouby stepped from the Palmer House and headed for the

Gusher Saloon. He carried a small briefcase and walked quickly. The roistering crowd of bearded, booted men, the gay laughter of women in brightly colored crinoline, the hoarse shouts of teamsters, punctuated by the crack of their bullwhips, the bang and rattle and clank of freight and supply wagons loaded with rig supplies of every description, the smell and taste of crude oil strong in his nose and on his tongue—all aroused within J. P. Willouby a mounting excitement.

This, he thought, was what he had missed all those futile years. Still, it wasn't too late to make a new start. His shoulders came back and he pulled in his rotund belly.

He was smiling as he entered the Gusher—but the smile could not slow the rapid beat of his heart. For once, his whole future hung upon a single sale.

* * *

A half hour later, J. P. Willouby walked into the Palmer House and up the stairs. Midway, Tony Marshall's voice brought him up short.

He turned, staring down at her nervously.

"You're a clever man, Willouby," the girl said bitterly. "But sometimes even clever men get caught in their own traps. I'm warning you. If anything happens to Carl . . ." She disappeared into the bar.

J. P. Willouby bit his lip. Somehow, Tony Marshall had guessed the truth. Women! he sighed. Damned if he'd ever understand them!

FOR the sixth time, J. P. Willouby ceased his pacing and looked at his watch. Two o'clock! Things should be reaching a climax. Thrusting his watch back into his pocket, he went downstairs and into the street.

A hundred men jammed the Gusher when J. P. Willouby pushed inside. And all hundred were crowded around a single table in the rear. Unobtrusively, J. P. Willouby wormed his way forward to the inner circle. Only then did he breathe a sigh of relief.

Chips and I.O.U's piled high in front of him, Carl Griffin picked up his cards, glanced briefly at Bruce Carter, and shoved his winnings out.

"A hundred and forty thousand," he said tightly. "You staying?"

Perspiration laid a damp sheen over Carter's dark face. He hesitated then scribbled out another I.O.U. and tossed it on the heap.

"I'm calling you," he said, and slapped down his cards. Griffin shrugged—and fanned out his own hand.

For an instant, Carter stared at the cards incredulously. Then he shoved back his chair. "Damn you, Griffin, there's something funny about this!"

Magically, the circle cut into two almost equal halves—Griffin's wildcatter friends curving behind him, Carter's hired hands spread out around their employer. But the setup wasn't to Carter's liking—yet.

Slowly, he sank back, his jaw ridged white with tension. But behind the man's anger, J. P. Willouby sensed a growing fear and hatred. Casually, he moved around to the oil king's right.

The silence was smothering. Strangely, young Griffin seemed the only calm man in the place. Tony Marshall's presence might have been responsible for that. She'd been standing beside him since ten o'clock—and her eyes had long since betrayed her feelings. Griffin twisted around and grinned at her. Then he turned back to the game.

"I'm letting it all ride, Carter," he said. "Are you staying?"

White-faced, Carter grabbed up the pencil. As he did so, a big gray-haired man bent over and whispered something in his ear. Carter slammed down the pencil and whirled on the big man.

"What do you mean, Purcell, I can't?"

he snarled at the gray-haired man.

Purcell flushed. "I mean that you can't cover Griffin's bet! That last hand left you ten thousand dollars overdrawn. And as the bank president, I can't back you on an insane gamble like this. For God's sake, man, don't you know when you're beaten? Griffin's red hot!"

With any other opponent, Carter might have listened to reason. But his staggering losses, coupled with his humiliation at the hands of a common wildcatter,. was too much for his ego. He wouldn't admit that he could not turn the tide in his favor.

"To hell with you then, Purcell," he said. "Tomorrow I'll withdraw my money from your lousy bank!"

"*If* you have any left, Bruce," Purcell said dryly. "At any rate, the Oilman's Bank did all right before you ever hit the Strip."

With luck running against him, Carter's star was waning. For his had been a conquest based upon fear and violence—not upon the solid foundation of friendship, hard work and fair play. Now he swung bleak eyes upon Griffin.

"All my oil holdings against what you've got there!"

A low murmur spread around the table. History was in the making. Either Bruce Carter would remain in power in the Strip or Carl Griffin, a beaten man a few hours before, would have worked a miracle.

It was that simple, J. P. Willouby thought. The result was already a foregone conclusion. History was about to repeat itself—with Carter, instead of J. P. Willouby, the fool.

Suddenly, his smile died. For young Griffin's was pinched to a putty white. A trickle of sweat ran down his nose, dripped upon the table. J. P. Willouby knew at once what had happened.

Carl Griffin couldn't go through with it the way they had planned.

J. P. Willouby sighed regretfully. Yet he could not help but admire the wildcatter's foolish courage. For with a half million dollars at stake and the chance to smash his enemy—and with the knowledge that no one would ever know the truth—Griffin had to play it straight. He couldn't betray his own conscience any further.

Thinking of his five thousand dollars slipping into Carter's pocket, J. P. Willouby swore inwardly. He'd thought he was so clever! Only he'd forgotten one thing—the inherent honesty of some men's natures.

Young Griffin's eyes met his, pleading for understanding. Covertly, he nodded and somehow managed a smile. Quick relief leaped into the wildcatter's eyes. He leaned forward.

"Let's get this thing over with, Carter," he said. "High card takes all!"

MEN stared at one another, unbelieving. Then tension laid a solid wall between wildcatters and Carter's men. Eyes grew wary and hands dropped casually to gun butts. Carter whispered something to Pete Winslow, a tall man with expressionless eyes and crossed gunbelts. Winslow nodded and spoke to a slim redhead. From there, the word spread throughout the Carter ranks.

Good-bye, sweet justice, J. P. Willouby thought ruefully. He'd be lucky if he got out of this with his life.

Sensing gunplay, the wildcatters spread into trouble formation. They still had plenty of fighting spirit.

"Give us a new deck, Joe!" Carter snapped to the houseman. "I'm taking no chances on this one!"

Joe Wheeler, a block-shaped man of fifty, tossed him a new deck. "One deck's as good as another here, Carter. The Gusher don't go in for crooked cards."

The fool! J. P. Willouby thought. He should have held his tongue until that last card was turned. Now if Carter won . . .

Carter's hand trembled as he broke the seal on the new pack. J. P. Willouby was shaking inside himself. In a moment, a

sliver of cardboard was going to determine three men's destinies—and with them, that of a vast, half-tamed country.

His eyes slid around the circle. Violence charged the air with pungent warning. There was no sound save the faint whisper of the cards.

Carter slapped down the deck. "Cut?" His voice was high-pitched.

Silently, Griffin cut the deck—and his face went chalk-white. J. P. Willouby didn't feel so good himself.

Carter turned up the king of diamonds!

A gust of sound swept the crowd. Carter sank back in his chair, smiling triumphantly. But he was sweating with relief. Beside Griffin, Tony Marshall caught her breath. Griffin sat frozen. J. P. Willouby's eyes were glued upon the deck.

Quietly, he moved within a couple of feet of Carter. Carter scowled at him—without sign of recognition. J. P. Willouby smiled and fumbled with a button on his vest. But behind that smile, his mind was cold, alert.

All eyes were on Griffin now—waiting. The wildcatter drew a deep breath—then reached out and turned over a card. It was the ace of spades.

Not a man moved. That black ace of death held them with a frozen fascination. Carl Griffin had broken the king of the Cherokee Strip.

For an interminable moment, Bruce Carter stared incredulously at the fateful card. He was through—a penniless has-been. His face drained dead white. Then color rushed back in a crimson gush.

"Why, you damned crook!" he shouted, and kicked back his chair. Griffin was ready for his draw—but it never came. For J. P. Willouby's Pepperbox was rammed against Carter's side.

"Don't, Carter!" J. P. Willouby said. "I'll scramble your guts!"

The oilman's face twisted with fury. He knew that the Pepperbox would riddle him before his men could gun down this fat fool. Slowly, his hand dropped away from his gun. "You're making a mistake, feller!"

A smile quirked J. P. Willouby's lips. "You made one years ago back in Tidout," he said, "when you used a dumb little tramp to take me for everything I had. Worse, when you murdered her and skipped out, I almost hung for your crime. I swore I'd make a bigger fool of you, Carter. Well, I've done it!"

"Willouby!" Carter's eyes widened. "J. Percival Willouby—the little corset salesman!" He laughed a little wildly.

"That's right," J. P. Willouby said calmly. "And it was my corset money that made you king of the Strip. But you're finished now, Carter. There's an old murder charge waiting for you back in Tidout!"

"You're crazy!" Carter said. "You killed Sheila Ames yourself because she cleaned you out!"

"The law says different," J. P. Willouby retorted. "It wants you."

An angry murmur rose from the crowd. Even Carter's own men eyed him with thinly veiled scorn. *Woman killer!* Sensing his own crew's hostility, Carter sought to change the subject.

"So you and Griffin rigged up this deal," he said. "I knew damn well the deck was stacked!"

"That's right," J. P. Willouby said coolly. "The deck was stacked. Although he didn't know it, I sold Joe Wheeler a dozen packs of marked cards this afternoon at a bargain. Then I taught Griffin how to read them. He spent the whole afternoon memorizing every card. He's read your hand all afternoon. When he couldn't beat you, he played it safe. Whenever he had a winning hand, he shot the works!"

Carter swung toward Griffin. "Why, you dirty—"

"Shut up!" J. P. Willouby snapped. "Griffin was too honest to go through with it all the way. That last deal was straight. He didn't know what he was going to draw until you picked up your card. He beat you

fair, Carter. Now that it's all over, you're going back to hang for murder!"

WITH a strangled cry, Carter knocked J. P. Willouby's arm aside and pulled steel. "Get him, boys!" he shouted. But for a fat man, J. P. Willouby was amazingly fast. All four bullets from the Pepperbox caught Carter in the side.

The oilman staggered, but stayed on his feet. He fired and a slug screamed past J. P. Willouby's head. Then young Griffin opened up from the table. Three neat holes dotted Carter's pearl-gray coat. He coughed, buckled at the knees and fell straight forward.

As the flat echoes of gunfire died away, J. P. Willouby swung his eyes slowly around the circle. The wildcatters presented a bristling array of sixguns—but not a Carter man had responded to their boss' orders. They didn't fight for a man who murdered women.

The tall gunman, Pete Winslow, said tersely, "Let's go, boys," and led them outside.

"Jehosaphat!" Joe Wheeler said in a cracked voice. "I'm thirsty! Step up, gents —the drinks are on the house!"

The tension broke then, and men, relieved of the fear of violent death, made for the bar. A couple dragged Carter's body away and a swamper casually mopped up the blood.

Turning, Griffin looked at J. P. Willouby. He tried to say something, failed. But the hard grip of his hand spoke volumes for him.

"You'd better get back to your friends," J. P. Willouby told him. "Besides, there's someone waiting for you. Someone special!"

Young Griffin spun and Tony Marshall gave him a radiant smile. The wildcatter slipped one arm around her, the other around J. P. Willouby's ample middle.

"As partners," he said, "we'll celebrate together!"

Bellied up to the bar—with men slapping him on the back in a friendly manner—J. P. Willouby knew the fulfillment of all his dreams. Hungry all his life for prestige, he'd gained what he *really* wanted from these tough, hard-bitten wildcatters: respect as a man.

Smiling J. P. Willouby, ex-corset salesman, tilted his glass in a silent toast to the future. ● ● ●

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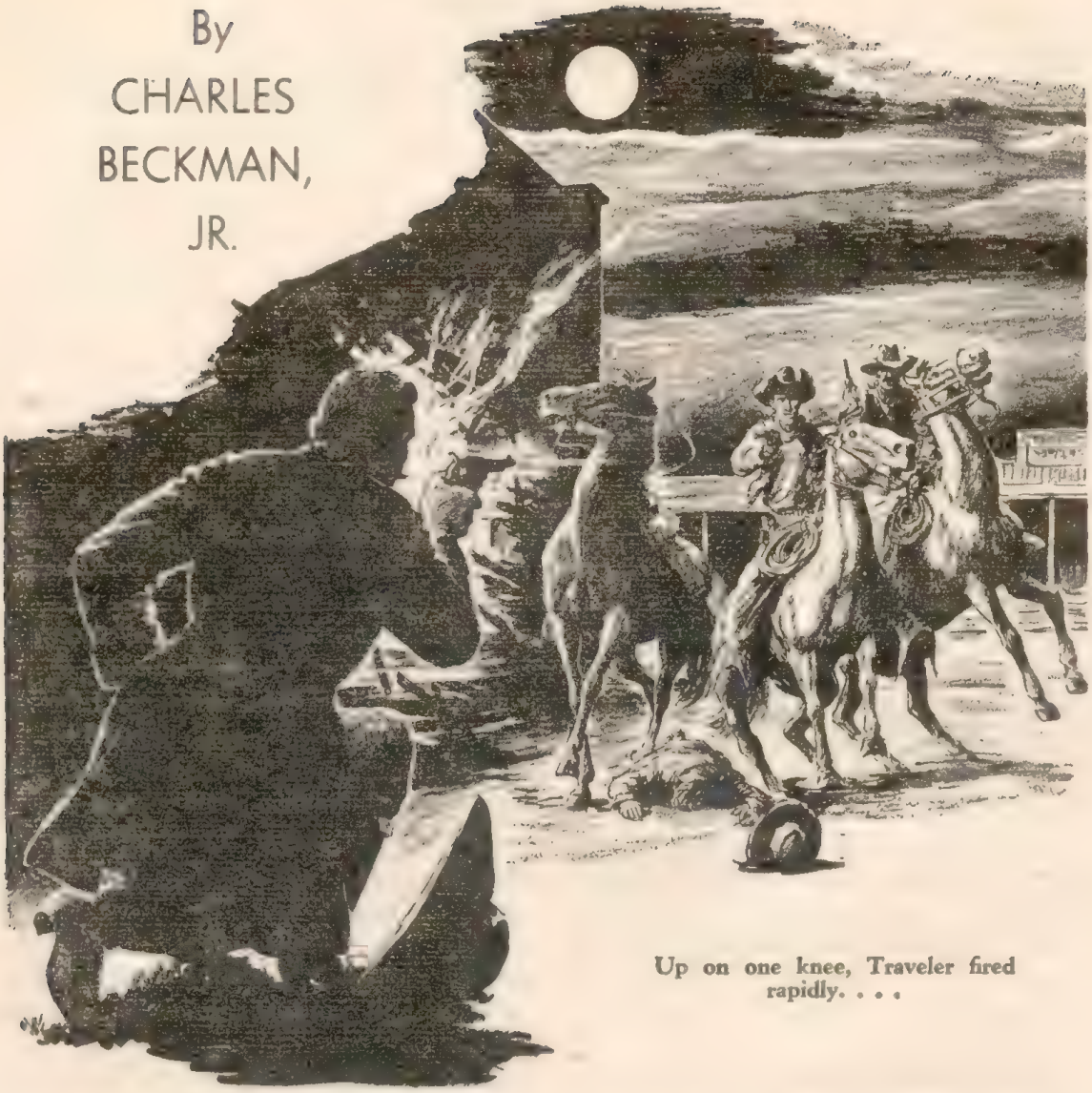

Up on one knee, Traveler fired rapidly. . . .

THE KID COMES BACK

It was the victory Traveler had dreamed about all his life. But he hadn't known this: That you can't build a new life on a foundation of death.

THE SUN broke like a cauldron of red flame that spring morning of 1873. To the man lying sleepless on the State Hotel bed, it was the dawn of a day for which he'd waited ten years. And for the unknowing town of Sandstone, coming awake, it was the start of a day of doom, when a kingdom would topple and blood would run as red as the boiling sun.

Clayton Traveler had not closed his eyes that night. But he felt fresh and alive. Every fiber of his muscles surged with the eagerness of ten years of waiting and planning for this day. He got out of bed and dressed in the half-light of dawn, tendons and muscles rippling under his skin.

He lit an early-morning cigar and walked down through the quiet, shadowy hotel lobby. Early risers were beginning to stir along the boardwalks of Sandstone. He found a café open and ordered scrambled eggs and coffee from the sleepy waitress. While he ate, he checked again the pages in his small black notebook. His plans for this day were as carefully mapped out as the stratagem of an army attack. As a cavalry sergeant in the Confederate Army and as a master gambler on New Orleans river boats, he had learned the value of intelligent planning. And he knew there must be no slip, for this day would not come again to him.

The newspaperman, Lang, was slow about opening his printing shop. He would, Clayton knew, be at home cowering in the bedclothes. Lang was a weak man with no stomach for placing bombshells under the cornerstones of empires. It was that very weakness, Clayton Traveler thought, chuckling, that had lost him his newspaper and made him the major tool in Traveler's scheme.

When he did at last open shop, Traveler crossed the street and followed him into the cluttered office, closing the door behind them.

Lang's face was pasty, his eyes red-rimmed, evidence of a twisting, sleepless night. He jumped like a nervous cat when Traveler closed the door.

"Oh, it's you. Listen—"

"No," Clayton said, "you listen first, Lang. Have you got the paper printed?"

Lang mopped his face shakily. "Yes. I worked until after midnight getting the first batch printed. I'll have it all finished by noon today." He took a copy from his desk. "I got the seventy-two point bold type you wanted from the *Star* over in Anderville."

Clayton nodded, running his eyes over the glaring headlines. He chuckled. "Sandstone's first extra. We're getting to be a city, Lang."

The newspaperman swore nervously. "We won't be a city at all, Traveler, when this thing hits the streets. We'll be a clammering, hysterical mob. And next week this time we'll all be beggars."

Traveler shook his head. "Only a few of us, Lang. Only the ones I want to be beggars."

"I tell you—"

"No," Traveler said sharply, "from now on, I tell you, Lang. I own this newspaper. You work for me." He handed the paper back. "Take this copy to Thomas Holland as soon as his bank opens, the way I told you. You can say anything. Tell him I bought your paper and made you print the story. Tell him I'm a black-hearted devil out to break him and ruin the town. But be sure and tell him I'm behind this. That the paper goes on sale at noon. And that he can find me over at the State Hotel."

CLAYTON TRAVELER walked out of the place, leaving behind a whimpering man swearing that if he didn't have a wife and children, he'd ride to hell out of there.

Traveler strolled down to the barber shop, got a seat in the first chair. From here he could see all of the main business street of Sandstone. The town put up a peaceful, tame front. The dust of the streets lay quiet and cool under gnarled liveoak trees. Saddle horses and buckboard teams dozed at hitchrails.

But he knew that was just a front. Sandstone was a town born of lust and blood and men's greed. And hates that still smoldered under the surface.

His own bitterness and hate had been born here, stirred into life by the ruthlessness of a man who had built an empire on the bullet-riddled bodies of innocent, law-abiding men.

He didn't have to close his eyes to remember the scene. The humble sod-buster's log shack where he'd been born. His mother, holding his sister in her arms and himself, a younker, peering from behind his

mother's skirts. His father, a hard-working squatter, honest and decent, standing before his family and his home, refusing to leave the land he had slaved over.

"You're a vicious murderer, Moffett Swiedom," his father had said, gripping his shotgun. "I know your men set fire to Jack Piper's shack, burned him and his wife to death in their beds. But you ain't scaring me. You're not cuting my fences and ruining my fields with your herds! You'll have to get water somewhere else, you rotten swine. . . ."

And Moffett Swiedom sat astride his horse, a huge man, outlined against the sky like some giant out of a frightening tale to little Clayton Traveler, and told his man quietly, "Shoot him."

Swiedom had turned and ridden away, as if he had ordered a dog shot. Joe Ruppell, his swarthy, scar-faced foreman had dropped his rifle across the crook of his arm and shot Traveler down before his family without blinking an eye.

Then the cattle had poured through the cut fences. And the cabin had been burned. . . .

The barber finished his shave, dusted his face and neck with talcum powder. He stood before the mirror, adjusting his black shoestring tie. He was a strong, tall man not quite thirty. He had jet-black hair, piercing black eyes and a carefully trimmed mustache. He was immaculately dressed in custom-tailored clothes and hand-tooled boots. He paid the barber, lit another of his thin, twisted cheroots and strolled back to the State Hotel.

There was an underlying tension in the air. As he suspected, Thomas Holland, the banker, was waiting for him in the lobby, pacing back and forth.

Holland fairly leaped at him, jabbing the paper with a trembling forefinger. "Traveler, if—" He remembered where they were and his voice died in the middle of the shout. He glanced around ludicrously, his fat, powdered jowels quivering, like a child with a guilty secret. Then he continued in a hoarse whisper, "If I'd known you were anything but a tinhorn gambler when you came to town last week, I would have had you run out! What kind of insane nonsense is this? What kind of trouble-maker are you?"

Clayton took the newspaper from the little man's fat, perspiring hand. His lips pursed as his eyes ran over the black headlines.

FINANCIAL PANIC GRIPS U. S. MARKETS PLUNGE. BANKS ALL OVER NATION CLOSE AS STOCKS AND BONDS BECOME WORTHLESS. MAJOR CORPORATIONS DECLARE BANKRUPTCY.

Holland pawed at him. "Don't read it out loud," he squeaked. "If someone hears you . . ."

Traveler handed the paper back, shrugged. "Looks like a good story to me. About time people in these hick towns heard about the depression. Why, in New Orleans—"

"Stop acting, Traveler. I know you're behind the printing of this paper. Lang told me!"

Clayton shrugged. "So?"

"So I want to know what you're up to!" Holland gasped. "Throwing a scare paper like this on the streets. Why, there'll be a run on my bank within fifteen minutes—"

"No," Clayton Traveler told him quietly. "Not *your* bank, Holland. *My* bank. You don't own a bank any more."

Holland's mouth bobbed open and shut wordlessly, his eyes bulging.

"Let's go up to my room," Traveler suggested. "You look like you could stand a drink of water, Holland. We can talk there."

TRAVELER locked the door behind them. "You see, Holland," he explained, pouring a drink of water from the pitcher on the dresser, "you lost your bank when you walked into the lobby downstairs, scared to death. You couldn't have told me

in plainer words that a run on your bank would ruin you. Like all the other fools, you've overinvested. Stripped yourself of capital."

Holland's teeth clicked against the rim of the glass. Water splashed on his chin, trickled down his shirt front.

Traveler stretched back on the bed, locking his fingers behind his neck. "You want a picture, Holland? Since the war, there has been a period of prosperity in the East. Capital has been absorbed in railroad security investments. Farmers have gone into debt, buying expensive new machinery. Bankers like yourself have made loans beyond the margin of safety, greedy for the fat interest they could get.

"Overinvestment," Clayton repeated. "Overinvestment all down the line. Ranchers buying more stock and land than they could afford. Using more credit than was safe. Well, it's over, Holland. The bubble has burst. There's a national panic. And this morning it reached Sandstone. . . ."

Holland's face was the color of bread dough. He looked as if he might be sick right there in the hotel room. "What do you want?" he panted in a strangled whisper.

"Want?" Traveler smiled. "The newspaper and your bank to begin with. But they're only tools." He seemed now to be talking to himself. "What I really want is Sandstone, the cattle empire that goes with it. And most of all, I want Moffett Swiedom. . . ."

"You're insane," Holland whispered. "Stark, raving—"

His voice broke off. He listened, eyes bulging even further.

The voices of Lang's paper boys drifted up from the street. "Extra! Extra edition of the Sandstone *Gazette*. United States gripped by financial panic. Banks close everywhere! Whole financial structure collapses!"

Clayton Traveler got up off the bed. He took a handful of the sweating banker's shirt. "Crazy? Maybe I am. A kid twenty years old, penniless and fresh out of the Confederate Army had to be a little crazy to build up a small fortune in less than ten years. I cheated and lied and gambled. Maybe I stole a little in an ethical business way. But the fact is that now I've got something nobody else in this part of the country has. Money, Holland. Not currency, but gold. Enough to stop the run on your bank. I've got it right here in Sandstone. You savvy that?"

A whimpering sound came from the banker's throat. Clayton released him. "We're going down to the bank now and fill out the necessary papers. I'm going to save your hide, but the bank and all its holdings will be turned over to me. I'll keep you as president—so long as you behave yourself.

"And your first duty," Traveler smiled mirthlessly, "will be to call Moffett Swiedom and tell him all of his notes become due as of today. . . ."

CLAYTON TRAVELER sat in Thomas Holland's private office with his boots on Holland's desk, wondering how long his good luck would hold out. He had taken wild chances all down the line, but they had paid off. The newspaper extra had produced the effect Traveler had hoped for. Irate citizens filled the street in front of the bank in a sweating, pushing line, demanding their money. There had been a considerable display of firearms, clubs and ropes when the mob first descended on the bank wanting their deposits. Thomas Holland had had little choice in the matter but to agree to Clayton Traveler's proposal. There was no other way he could get the necessary cash to stop the bank run. Bankers in surrounding towns were in as bad shape as he. He knew the crowd was in a lynching mood. Cowering in his office, he had agreed to sign anything to save his neck.

So Traveler had bought himself a bank. For the past three hours, Holland and his

two clerks had been out front in their cages, paying off as quickly as their trembling fingers could count gold chips.

Now Holland stuck his head in the door. "Mr. Swiedom is here."

Traveler nodded slowly. He felt moisture gather in the palms of his hands and he rubbed them slowly along his thighs. He had waited ten years for this moment. His heart increased its tempo as the big cattle baron and his foreman entered the room.

Through the years, Traveler had carried his childhood image of Moffett Swiedom. A mountain of a man outlined darkly against the sky. Now, seated in the office, Swiedom was no less imposing.

His hair had whitened, but his face was still ruddy, beefy. A network of tiny veins across the bridge of his large nose and his cheeks formed purplish tracings. When he spoke, the office windows rattled.

"What kind of tomfoolery is this Holland has been babbling about?"

He didn't ask Traveler's name or wait to be introduced. His mien was that of royalty addressing scum.

Traveler's eyes shifted toward Swiedom's foreman, Joe Ruppell, the man who had shot down his father. Of course, these two men did not remember the squatter boy who had cowered behind his mother's skirts while he watched his father die.

Traveler looked at Swiedom again. "It simply means," he answered softly, "that I own this bank now. And I'm calling in all notes that are due."

Swiedom stood up. "I'm rounding up my herds now for a drive to market," he thundered. "You'll get your money in a few weeks. Soon's we get back from Abilene." He started to the door.

Clayton's voice cut at his back with the snap of a bullwhip. "You'll pay it now, Swiedom. This afternoon. Or in the morning you won't have a ranch!"

Sweidom swung around. He leaned over the desk. "Maybe, young feller," he said, his voice dropping to a husky whisper, "you don't know who it is you're talkin' to."

"I'm talking to the man who owns the biggest spread of land and the most cattle in this section of Texas," Traveler answered. "A man who has mortgaged all of it so he could double his holdings. I'm talking to a thief and a murderer who's finally got his back to the wall!"

Joe Ruppell came to his feet, pulling iron. But the muzzle of Clayton's pistol appeared over the edge of the desk and Ruppell sat down again when Traveler told him he'd enjoy nothing more than splattering the scar-faced foreman's guts all over Holland's office wall.

In the midst of the tension, the door opened. Swiedom whirled. He swore, "What are you doin' here?"

The woman came in, closing her parasol. "I finished my shopping. I wasn't going to wait out in the sun!"

Her eyes met Clayton's. They were wide, gray eyes, filled with a strange knowledge beyond their years. Her body, slim and strong with youth, was rounded with the sweetness of womanhood. She carried her chin high, eyes level. But more with an air of courage than with Swiedom's brand of arrogance. She was, perhaps, twenty-four.

Clayton arose. She smiled at him. "I'm Mrs. Swiedom," she told him with simple directness as if knowing her husband would not introduce them.

Traveler felt a shock. He nodded, aware of the clean, attractive lines of her face, her slim white throat. "I'm Clayton Traveler, ma'am."

"The man the whole town is talking about," she smiled.

Swiedom was glowering. "You've got no call to come in here when we're talkin' business!"

Traveler interrupted. "We're about through, Swiedom. If you don't mind your wife's hearin' the end of it. First, I know you're cattle and land poor. You can't lay your hand on a dime cash. So I'm foreclosing on your notes today. My men will go

out with the sheriff in the morning and take over your herds. I notice that among your security you've listed your house here in town. I'm talking that over immediately because I want to give a party in the ballroom tonight. I'll give you plenty of time, of course, to move out of your ranch house."

A hush gripped the room. Voices from the milling crowd in the street drifted up to them. In the silence could be heard Holland and his clerks scurrying around in the front office. Swiedom stood swaying like a huge, enraged grizzly. "You haven't heard the end of this, you tinhorn gambler," he breathed. "Not by a long way! "

He strode out, followed by Ruppell. The woman's eyes met Clayton's once again. He felt the stirring of a strange, disturbing emotion.

SANDSTONE buzzed. Men stood on street corners, gathered in saloons, around store counters. The name "Clayton Traveler" was on their lips and they stared up toward Swiedom's mansion on the hill and wondered what next. . . .

The heat of the afternoon was dying with the sinking sun. In shirtsleeves, Clayton Traveler directed preparations for the ball.

The great white colonial house, built by Swiedom wealth and power, had stood as a landmark for years. Travelers from distant ends of the country were awed by its rolling lawns, great liveoak trees dripping moss, its polished mahogany floors, imported furniture and china. Moffett Swiedom had built it for his first wife. With her death, he had moved out to his ranch and never again set foot in the mansion. But his servants kept it spotless, a show place for visitors.

To the young squatter boy, Clayton Traveler, it had been a symbol of Moffett Swiedom's awesome power. He remembered the great parties in this mansion when he and his sister had crept up on the lawn in the darkness and listened to the sawing of fiddles and the laughter of young voices. His sister had cried because she was young and pretty, but too poor. . . .

Clayton Traveler had clenched his boyish fists and vowed some day to own this mansion and give the grandest ball Sandstone had ever seen!

Now the crates of champagne he'd brought from New Orleans had been unpacked. A band from across the Border, dressed in fiesta costumes was tuning up in the ballroom. Cattle were being barbecued in the back yard.

Traveler stood in the door to welcome his guests. Everyone in Sandstone came, and all the surrounding ranchers. They arrived on horseback, in buggies, buckboards and wagons, afraid to ignore the invitation from this new, powerful man.

For him it was a night of triumph. But his mind was not on it. His thoughts were of gray, level eyes and curved lips—of a woman who had stirred him deeply.

Near midnight, he left the crowd for a moment's fresh air under a liveoak tree in the back yard. His face was flushed with champagne. He was smoking a slim, black cigar. In the ballroom, the fiddles were sawing away on a Texas dance.

A horse stirred off in the darkness. Traveler's hand blurred, came up holding a derringer. He moved to the protection of the tree trunk.

The horse came closer and a woman called softly, "Mr. Traveler? I saw you leave the house."

He came away from the tree and she nudged the horse closer to the light. The horse had been ridden hard. She was wearing a man's blue denim trousers, forking the horse like a man. Her shirt was unbuttoned at the collar and her hair had been tangled by the wind.

"I—I've been here several minutes. I didn't know how to let you know. Then I saw you come out of the house."

He raised his hands, helped Moffett Swiedom's young wife out of the saddle.

He was actutely aware of the warmth of her nearness. He looked down at the curve of her cheek and the white hollow of her throat where her shirt was unbuttoned.

She moved away from him nervously. She glanced at the tree, the house, avoiding his eyes. Then the familiar courage returned and she raised them, meeting his squarely.

"What are you after, Clayton Traveler?"

He smiled, "Did you ride all the way out here at midnight to ask me that? Well, I'm after your husband," he told her bluntly. Briefly, he outlined how Swiedom had killed his father.

"I wanted to know what you were like . . . ruthless, I think. . . ." She seemed to shiver slightly.

"Why did you come here?"

She hesitated. "To warn you."

"About your husband?"

She lowered her eyes. "He—he won't take this without fighting back. He—"

"Let me make it easier for you. He's sending men into town tonight to tear the bank apart and take my money out by brute force. He's like a trapped mountain lion, backed against a wall. If possible, he'll have me killed."

She shook her head slowly. "But how could you know . . .?"

"Stop it," he said sharply. "You knew I'd know that. If I'd have sense enough to trap Swiedom into this, I'd have sense enough to know he'd fight back. Now tell me why you really came."

"I—I . . ."

"Perhaps it was for this," he said, his throat tight. He took her in his arms and kissed her.

She was stiff against him, her lips cold. But suddenly they parted with a sob and her back went limp. When he raised his head she was crying silently, her cheeks wet with tears. Woman-like, she turned away from him. "You'll think I'm a cheap hussy, coming here like this—letting you kiss me."

"Why did you marry him?" Clayton asked harshly. "You wanted his money?"

"No!" He was surprised at the vehemence of her denial. "You know Moffett Swiedom. You can understand this. He wanted me. He wanted someone young and pretty and healthy to bear him a son. A prince to rule the Swiedom domain!" Her voice was twisted and bitter. "What Moffett Swiedom wants, he gets. He threatened to break my father, to take his ranch away. Dad has a weak heart. . . ."

She raised her chin proudly. "He tried to break me. But he couldn't. I willed it that I wouldn't bear him a child. I swore it over and over to myself. . . ."

Clayton gripped her slim shoulders. "Listen, I have to ride to town now. I have men waiting to take over Swiedom's herds early in the morning. I'm helpinng drive them to Abilene, myself. I've cut this pretty thin and I'll need the money those herds will bring. Luckily, Swiedom already has them rounded up. It's a hard trail, but you're young and healthy. Will you go with me?"

"You—you didn't say if you loved me."

He smiled down at her gently. "I love you."

"You won't let him hurt father?"

"Swiedom is through hurting anybody."

"I'll be on the rise in the east pasture at dawn, waiting." She swung up on the horse. "Clayton—my name is Annie."

HE SLIPPED into the house and quietly buckled on his gunbelt. He didn't disturb the dancers. The air was cool on his face as he walked toward the center of town. Scudding clouds kept the moon hidden. Velvety darkness made the cluster of buildings shapeless blobs. It was quiet. Too quiet. The town was like a giant animal, holding its breath, crouched to spring.

The fiddles and voices from the Swiedom mansion—the Traveler mansion, now—wafted into town. Clayton kept to the darkest shadows of the boardwalk, stepping softly. Somewhere a horse whinnied and

stomped. Clayton froze. He was diagonally across the street from the bank building. He slipped his Colt .45 out of his holster and held it, waiting, wondering if he had enough men stationed around the bank.

The horse whinnied again. And then he saw them. A large, sluggish body of horses and men riding them. Coming at a slow trot like a tide of water.

All of Swiedom's hands. Led by Joe Ruppell.

Traveler's man on top of the hotel started it. His rifle split the stillness with orange flame and crashing shots. A horse screamed and a man fell. Clayton cursed, wishing the man had waited until the whole mob was in the street before the bank.

Shots from the body of horsemen answered the fire from the hotel building. A lucky bullet found the mark and the man tumbled head over heels to the ground, his rifle clattering after him.

The other men waiting in doorways, behind troughs and on roofs opened fire. Swiedom's riders on their milling horses answered, firing blindly into the darkness.

Straining his eyes, Traveler saw part of the riders work themselves free and circle to the side of the bank building that was not covered. Traveler ran after them, ducking across the open street. He heard the vicious snap of lead around his head. Something tugged at his shirt.

Then he reached the shelter of the buildings on the other side. There were three men pulling their horses into the shelter of the bank building, near the office window. Traveler saw a match flare. Then a spitting fuse arched into the night. The riders spurred their horses back and away. Traveler flung himself prone. The blast of dynamite deafened him, scorched his face with a hot rush of air.

Up on one knee, Traveler fired rapidly. Two of the men tumbled like sacks from their saddles. The third man leaped from his horse and came toward Traveler, moving in a crouch, answering shot for shot. Traveler leveled his gun and punched a shot at the middle of the advancing shape.

The man screamed and doubled over his wound.

Clayton stood up. In the flickering light from the burning wall, he saw it was Swiedom's scar-faced foreman, Joe Ruppell. He writhed, clutching his stomach. "Finish it," Ruppell pleaded. "For God's sake . . ."

"You killed my father," Traveler said through his teeth and turned his back on the man. But after he took three steps, he turned around. He thought, pulling the trigger of his pistol again, that there was still some weakness left in him.

AT DAWN the next morning, he rode across Swiedom's rolling pasture, a sweat-grimed, smoke-blackened figure.

Topping the next rise, he saw a small figure waiting patiently on her horse. He rode up to her, smiling.

"I prayed for you. All night," she told him simply.

"It's all right," he said. "Everything's all right. Are you ready to go?"

She looked away from him, her fine courage deserting her at last. "I am not going with you, Clayton."

He sat there not speaking. Waiting for her to finish.

"It was terrible, seeing him lose, Clayton. He's been a man of power all his life. A king. And then suddenly he was an empty shell. A pathetic old man. He—he tried to kill himself. And failed even at that. The bullet lodged near his spine. The doctor says he may be paralyzed. He needs me, Clayton. I'm all he has left. I couldn't desert him . . . now."

"No," Traveler said slowly. "You couldn't."

"Maybe—maybe some day."

"Yes. Maybe some day."

He turned and rode off into the dawn. Several times he looked back and she was still sitting there. She was there until he couldn't see that far any more. ● ● ●

By ROBERT E. MAHAFFAY

He had accepted their nursing when he lay sick, and eaten their food when he was starving. But not even for lovely Judy would he forego making bitter payment—with their own bullets!

WESTWARD ROLLS

The wagon train gnawed its way into the treeless plain at the rate of twenty miles a day....

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Thrilling Wagon-Train Novelette

CHAPTER ONE

Devil's Decoy

IT WAS late September, and there was a stinging chill to the rain pouring down through the early dusk, but young Ron Brix was too excited to notice. He gripped his light squirrel rifle tightly, not wanting the four older riders with him to know that he was scared and worried.

By standing up in his stirrups he could see, beyond the rim of a shallow coulee, the farmhouse with its pair of pole sheds and fenced pasture in which half a dozen cows stood hump-backed against the rain. It

AN EMPIRE • • • •

didn't look like a battleground. It looked ordinary—dreary and helpless.

"That the place, Link?" he asked the leader. "I thought you fellers pushed all the Mormons across the river? I didn't know there was any left on this side."

He could see Link Sawtrey nodding, his dark, hawklike face curiously tight. "There's a few that've been hiding out, thinking we'd skip 'em. Well, by God, we ain't going to! We're booting 'em out of Illinois, every man jack of 'em."

Ron Brix scowled with the ferocity of his eighteen years. Everybody talked about what rascals the Mormons were, and what a good thing it was to get rid of them. They were horse thieves and counterfeiters and robbers, folks said, and mean as a bull with a new ring in his nose. He was glad to be in on the fun of helping with the job of driving them away.

He had missed out on the excitement three weeks ago, when almost every able-bodied man in the country had ganged up on the Mormon town of Nauvoo and harried the last of the Mormons across the Mississippi. That had been really something, according to what he had heard. There had been fighting, and bullets flying, and people killed.

And he had missed it! He hadn't been able to think about fun then. Jonathan Brix, his father, had been dying, shot through the stomach from ambush. The shock of that tragedy had left Ron's mind clogged with dull pain, and when Link Sawtrey had stopped and asked him if he wanted to come along, he had jumped at the chance.

It seemed like a game, sort of—putting the skids under a stray Mormon who hadn't obeyed when he was told to get out. Only the toughness of the three men with Link Sawtrey put a shade of doubt into Ron Brix's head.

THEY were hardcases, and half drunk already. He didn't know their names. One of them was tall, burly and silent. The second was gaunt-faced, and his lips made a harsh, smacking noise when he gulped at the nearly empty whiskey bottle. The third was an undersized, wizened man in butternut pants and a linsey-woolsey jacket. A big knife was in his belt.

Ron didn't want them to think that he was just a kid, so he said sturdily, "How we going to work this, Link? Just ride down there, all of us together?"

Link Sawtrey spat before he answered. The gaunt-faced man was looking away and turning the bottle in his thick fingers. The burly gent whistled softly between his teeth, and the one with the knife was stropping the blade on a calloused palm.

"Why, kid," Link Sawtrey said gently, "maybe that wouldn't be the best way. We thought we'd let you go first, seeing as you'd naturally want to pay the Mormons off for your dad's killing."

Puzzled, Ron stared across the pricking white ears of his old gelding. "There wasn't anybody that knew," Ron said reluctantly. "They just found him, that was all. He was taking money over to La Harpe to buy the land next to ours. Somebody shot him to get the money. Nobody knows it was the Mormons. . . ."

Talking about that still hurt Ron Brix. It was only a month ago that word had come to him about his father—found dying on the prairie halfway to La Harpe. He had got a wagon and brought him back to the sod cabin and nursed him for two weeks before he died. During those two weeks Jonathan Brix had spoken only one phrase.

Link Sawtrey's dark face hardened now. "Why, kid, sure the Mormons done it! That's why I figured you'd want to come along."

Ron cried hoarsely, "You *ain't* sure of that!"

"Plumb sure, kid."

"But, damn it, nobody else told me that. How do *you* know?"

Link shrugged. "It was just at the time the Mormons was being pinched the worst.

A lot of 'em had got away already. The rest of 'em needed to scrape up money 'fore they could leave. Here, if you got any doubts, look at this." Sawtrey fumbled in the inner pocket of his coat and pulled out a crumpled paper. "I thought you knew, so I plumb forgot about it."

Ron Brix leaned over in the saddle, his hand reaching out. The paper was a torn printed sheet, and on it was a dark stain of blood.

"It's out of the *Book of Mormon*," Sawtrey said easily. "I was coming past there after you'd picked your old man up. I stopped to scout around, and that's what I found. Jonathan shook one slug out of his gun 'fore they got him, remember. That gent wanted a plaster to stop the bleeding, and he used the only thing he had that'd do. One of the pages slipped away from him, and I found it."

There was a choking tightness in Ron Brix's throat as he stared at the blood-stained paper. Until now he had but one slight means of tracing the killer. This was something else, something concrete.

His voice shaking, he blurted, "Damn 'em, Link! Damn 'em! I'll whittle my pay out of 'em for this. Every blamed one of 'em!"

"That's talking, kid! Figured you'd feel that way." Link Sawtrey jerked his head down toward the farmhouse. "These Mormons get cagey as hell. If we go in a bunch, he'll smell a rat. You slide down there first, kid. He won't think nothing about you coming alone. Put your gun on him, and if you have to plug him, do it. We'll slip around and come in from the other side."

"Sure," Ron Brix said. His tongue was thick in his mouth.

He rode out of the coulee at a slow gallop. Anger was growing in him, making his breath come hard. He had started out with these men this afternoon for the fun of it, snatching at a break in his dull loneliness after the long and bitter vigil with his father. But this wasn't fun any more. It was grim, deadly business.

THE RING of an axe against wood came from the lean-to against the house. Ron Brix rode there. He pulled in and lifted the gun from across his cantle before the man saw him.

The man straightened, leaning his axe against the block. He was broad-shouldered but stooped a little, and his full beard was salted with gray. Square-cornered steel spectacles contrasted queerly with the curving wrinkles about his gentle eyes.

He nodded in a friendly way. "Howdy, brother. My name's Harper. You're just in time for supper, if pretty thin stew will do."

Ron Brix stared. He didn't know just what he had expected to find. Some sort of a snarling hardcase, maybe; a man who looked like a horse thief and a killer. At any rate, someone besides a gentle old man like this—an old man whose bent shoulders and tired eyes reminded Ron a little of Jonathan Brix.

But these Mormons were cagey, Link had pointed out. Ron said harshly, "You own this place?"

Harper, shadowed by the dusk, wiped his sweaty palms on patched homespun trousers tucked into worn boots. "Well, I do, but I'm trying to sell. Got to move my family across the river."

"You're a Mormon, ain't you?"

"Yes, I'm a Mormon. Proud to be one. That supper now, brother—I got this wood to tote in." He stooped and began to pick up the split chunks.

Ron felt foolish, sitting there in the saddle holding the gun so tightly in his hands. Maybe he was being tricked; maybe this Harper was just play-acting to trap him. He stepped out of the saddle gingerly.

The old farmer nodded toward Ron's mount. "That's a good white horse you have there. Not a runner, I reckon, but he looks like he could get down and pull

when there was pulling to be done. When there's a piece of hard ground to be plowed—" He didn't finish.

A woman's scream lifted piercingly through the dusk. Ron jerked his head toward the sheds to the left. He heard the wood held in the crook of Harper's arm tumble to the hard-packed dirt. A girl in a light-colored dress darted out of the nearest shed. The gaunt-faced man who had been with Link Sawtrey came plunging behind her, his rifle gripped in one hand. The girl was swifter, but she stumbled.

Harper brushed past Ron, running heavily toward the girl. The gaunt-faced man was kneeling over her, a splay-fingered hand holding her down. Then the man heard Harper calling. He straightened swiftly, whipped up his rifle and shot. The old farmer jerked to a stop and spun half around. A curtain of blood was suddenly pouring down across his kindly eyes, over his nose, into his beard.

Clawing fingers seemed to wrench savagely at Ron Brix's heart. He recalled so vividly that when he had found old Jonathan, his father's face had looked like that. This wasn't fun; it wasn't even vengeance. A helpless old man . . .

Clearly Ron Brix heard the girl's quick, stifled sobbing. She had scrambled up and darted to Harper. Then toward them lurched the renegade, shifting his hands and gripping the rifle by its barrel.

Ron shouted and got a swiveling, evil glance from pale eyes. The clubbed gun lifted for a smashing blow. Then something snapped the bonds of uncertainty shackling him and the squirrel rifle was at his shoulder. He felt the kick of the stock, and through the puff of powdersmoke he saw the white, amazed face of the girl.

Reaction hit him like a blow in the stomach. He knew where that bullet had gone, as surely as if his target had been a frozen rabbit instead of a man. With a bullet hole just above his nose, the renegade was dead.

And he had done it!

THE sound of a voice ripping out curses pulled Ron Brix back to his senses. Figures were flitting toward him through the half dark from the farther shed. Link Sawtrey and the other two were coming at him, shooting as they came. The thought sank home that he was as much a target for their rage now as the old Mormon.

A bullet, flicking through his thin shirt and furrowing the skin of his arm, stung him into action. He dropped to one knee, and reloading with hasty care, triggered another ball. The range was greater this time, and the light deceptive, but the shot drew a yelp of pain. He heard Link Sawtrey bawl, "That kid's a devil with a gun!" The three charging figures halted their rush, melted back into the gloom.

The girl was trying to lift old Harper, and failing at it. Ron went forward in a crouch, boosted the limp old man across his shoulder and staggered with him back to the farmhouse.

"In here," the girl directed with a coolness that startled him, and led the way to a room beyond the kitchen. Ron was back and jamming a table against the boltless door when the first bullet splintered through the wood. From outside, for the next minute or two, a rifle and a six-shot pistol maintained a slashing fusillade.

Ron Brix waited, crouching against the floor. The walls were flimsy and not proof against bullets. The shooting slackened, and a voice—not Sawtrey's—yelled, "You coming out of there, Brix, or do we gun you out?"

He didn't answer. Hunched there in the dark, he was a little frightened of what he had done. There was that dead man out there, for one thing. The remaining three were killers, he knew now. He didn't mean to give up the old Mormon to them, but he understood that his fight here would be a hopeless one. Soon they'd start burning the place, and that, sooner or later, would be the end.

The voice yelled again, "We'll get a hun-

dred men if it takes that many. Or we'll roast you out of there like a damn pig!"

Ron didn't answer, and again bullets began to slap through the walls. There was only a wooden shutter over the kitchen window. He pried up one of the boards, and pushed the muzzle of his gun through.

He didn't realize that the girl had come back until he heard the soft intake of her breath close to him. She was saying with a steadiness that surprised him, "We can't stay here, can we?"

"Don't see how we'll get out," Ron told her. "Not with carrying the old feller."

"He's my father. He'll be able to walk in a little while, I think. The bullet just tore his scalp and stunned him."

She was so close that Ron seemed to feel the warmth of her. His eyes were accustomed now to the dark. He could make out the pale oval of her face. It was about on a level with his shoulder, and it seemed that what scanty light remained was gathered in her eyes, giving them a soft glow. He felt acutely, somehow, that she was less afraid than he.

Yet her voice trembled slightly as she whispered, "That man would have killed him—if you hadn't stopped it." When he had nothing to say to that, she added, "Maybe you didn't know when you saved my father that we're Mormons."

"Yes, I knew it," he said huskily.

"I had to tell you that," she murmured desperately. "Helping us will only get you into trouble. You don't have to stay. You've done enough for us already."

A vague shape surged out from the nearest shed. Ron Brix snapped a quick shot, but it was a miss. Reaching for his powder horn he muttered, "I'm staying, anyhow. But we got to get out of here. Is there any place you can go that's safe?"

"Only one. Across the river. Most of the other Mormons are there, you know. We should have gone before this, but we haven't any money, and father wanted to sell."

Ron Brix turned that over in his mind.

It was clear now that Link Sawtrey and the others had come only in search of plunder. They had believed, evidently, that Harper had money or valuables. He had only been brought along as decoy. He wondered what had made him rebel as he had. This girl and her father were Mormons, and Mormons had murdered Jonathan. He had that crumpled, bloodstained scrap of paper in his pocket to prove it. He had reason enough to hate them.

And now he was debating helping them further. For he knew what would happen to them if he didn't, as he had found out when he saw the bloody, haggard face of old Harper. That wasn't the sort of revenge he wanted. He stirred himself.

"Well," he said bluntly, not looking at the girl, "if there's any way to get you to the river, I'll do it."

CHAPTER TWO

Beyond Hell's Doorway

RON BRIX stared out through the shutter. There wasn't much time to decide anything. They had to get out of the house, and he didn't see how it was to be done. It was quiet outside now; probably Sawtrey and the others were hatching their scheme to bring fire to the farmhouse.

He left the girl at the window and went into the bedroom. The old farmer was conscious now, able to talk and sit up.

Ron said curtly, "There ain't a rag of hope for us if we don't pull out mighty quick. Can you travel?"

The old man sighed. "This way is God's will, I reckon. I can make a stab at it."

The weakness in Harper's voice was indication enough that he wouldn't be able to foot it very far. Ron growled, "If we had a horse or two—"

"I got five head in a pasture down by the creek. But it's close to half a mile away."

That would do, Ron thought, if they

could get to them. All they needed was the start. There was a way to get that, if his guess as to Sawtrey's purpose here was correct. He went back to the girl, told her briefly what would have to be done.

She left him, and he called out through the shutter, "Don't fire the house, boys. We're through fighting."

He heard nothing for a moment. Then a voice answered, "We ain't, mister. There's a dead man out here to be answered for."

"He got what he asked for," Ron snapped. "We don't want something for nothing, though. Harper's willing to buy his way out."

"Yeah? How much?"

"I ain't sure just how much. Every penny he's got. We'll tell you where it's buried if you'll swap us two broncs and a chance to clear out."

There was a long period of silence before the voice purred, "Sure, that's fair enough. You tell us where the old devil's got it buried, and as soon as she's dug up you get the ponies."

A hard grin formed on Ron Brix's lips. That easy acquiescence was the tipoff that the second half of the bargain would not be kept. He called carefully, "All right. We'll be trusting you. Dig in the left hand corner at the back of the far shed. Make it fast, will you, boys? The old feller's head is in bad shape, and we got to get him to a sawbones."

It was so dark now that he could see nothing in the yard, but ears keenly tuned brought him the sound of boots pumping soggily out there in the mud. Two of them at least, he judged, were making hastily for the shed. The other one, unwillingly, would hang back to keep an eye on the farmhouse.

Ron said softly over his shoulder. "All right. We'll try for it now."

The girl, who had changed to dark shirt and denim overalls, was steadying her father. "We can't take anything with us?" she asked.

"You're alive, aren't you?" he told her grimly. "You may not be that an hour from now."

Ron inched the door open cautiously, and went through first, gun crooked in his elbow, an icy spur roweling his backbone. The splatter of rain on the wet ground helped to cover the sound of their movements. Then a hundred feet from the house Ron stopped to listen. Faintly came the scrape of digging implements, the mutter of excited swearing. They had made it. They had their start!

It was only the beginning, though. Ron Brix gave his rifle to the girl, and took one of old Harper's arms across his shoulders. The farmer was panting between clenched teeth, and now and again a stifled groan broke from his throat.

It was only half a mile to the creek pasture, but it seemed ten times that. An eternity of floundering on slippery sod, splashing through muddy potholes, stumbling on with the burden of the old man growing more and more of a dead weight.

"This way," the girl's voice came at him out of the dark ahead. "There it is!"

He swung toward her, and as he did it the snarl of gunfire broke out in a wrathful chatter behind them. "Found out we slickered 'em," he grunted. "They're jumping the house, and it won't take 'em long to get started this way!"

HE WENT to work silently and swiftly. The horses were work animals, and not hard to rope. They had no saddle, but the girl brought two battered rope hackamores. Ron boosted the old farmer across a broad back, scrambling up behind to hold him there.

The girl came up with them. "It's five or six miles to the river," she said brokenly. "There's a boat—if only we can get to it!"

Ron Brix saw then the spear of red crawling into the black void of the sky from the direction of the farmhouse. The renegades had fired the place, evidently. He

goaded the animal to the best pace it could muster, and through the soggy plop of hoofs he heard the girl sobbing quietly. He could understand that.

Everything she and her father had was gone. He had felt the same helpless emptiness when Jonathan had died. It occurred to him suddenly that he didn't know this girl's name or what she looked like. He shrugged. He didn't care. She and her father were Mormons.

Hard-ridden, the horses were blowing. The rain had increased to a sluicing downpour, and a knifing cold rode with it. Ron peered ahead into the wet blackness, trying to concentrate on the footing, but his mind turned back annoyingly to the girl. If she reached the river and crossed it, where would she go? Nauvoo had been a big city of twenty thousand or more souls. It was empty now. Most of the Mormons were strung out along some three hundred miles between the Mississippi and Missouri.

He had heard how the Mormons had been driven from Independence and Far West before being hounded from Nauvoo. Where would they go now? Beyond the Missouri lay wilderness, rugged mountains, Indian country. . . .

Harper, sagging down across the horse's neck, lost his hold and almost fell. Ron pulled in, sat there listening. Faintly over the din of the rain he heard the beat of fast-coming hoofs. Sure that the river presented the only means of escape, Sawtrey was riding hard to intercept them.

Ron growled at the girl, put his heels into the ribs of the awkward mount under him. If there was a rush left in him, he had to use it.

Both horses, already worked hard that day, were staggering. Ron Brix's jaw clamped tightly. Old Harper was reeling helplessly, and holding him upright absorbed all of Ron's attention. Pouring out of the dead blackness, the rain hammered his back and his bare head.

The girl was at his side, crouching along her mount's neck. He heard her scream, "This way! We're below the boat!"

She swerved, vanished in the darkness, and he turned to follow. The muffled roar of a pistol shot droned from behind. From his left surged up the gurgle and slap of the swollen river. Sawtrey could probably hear them, but in the dark they would be hard to find.

There were minutes of plunging along blindly, the rain slashing against his eyes, then his mount rammed into a riderless horse and stopped, snorting. Ron heard the girl's voice shouting something, but he couldn't make out the words. He slid down, and cradling the limp frame of old Harper in his arms, went toward her. His boots splashed into water. He heard the rattle of brush being thrown aside, made out the shadowy form of a skiff with the girl bending over it.

Dragged up on the shore, it was too much for her strength to move.

Ron laid the old man across the thwarts, got his hands under the prow and heaved. The skiff slipped out through the mud. Ron held it there as the girl floundered past him with oars and tumbled in over the side. He half turned his head. There was a jumble of shouts behind him, and then he picked up Link Sawtrey's strident roar.

Something held him motionless there, his hand on the boat. The girl was crying in a husky whisper, "Push us out! Push us out!"

A shove, and the boat would be floating down the river, then he could dart away and lose himself in the darkness. There was an agonized, desperate note in the girl's voice now.

Until this tense, racing moment he had not even remotely considered going in the boat. His job was finished when he'd brought the girl and her father here. That was all he figured he was responsible for.

But now, in the rain-washed night, with the girl begging him in a choked undertone to push them away, and with Sawtrey's

angry shouts ringing in his ears, two thoughts hit him savagely. If he went back to the farm he would have the killing of the gaunt-faced man to answer for. Done in defense of a Mormon, he could expect no leniency. More important, he was sure now that a Mormon had murdered Jonathan. That Mormon must be somewhere among the camps strung westward from the Mississippi.

Ron Brix waded out, gave a hard thrust with his feet, and flung himself on his belly across the bow of the skiff.

STRAINING his eyes, he could see movement but no figures on the bank behind him. Spots of flame sprang out on the dark curtain, and the crash of shots rolled over the water. As the river bore them rapidly to the south, those sounds faded and died. Little waves tapped at the sides of the skiff with dull monotony; slanting rain pelted the river with a hissing chatter.

Ron Brix fumbled for the oars and thrust them between the pins. He rowed with a splashing awkwardness, using the current to keep his direction.

In the stern he dimly saw the shape of the girl, hunched and motionless, her father's shoulders resting against her knees. Her rapid, strained breathing broke off suddenly, and she cried, "Why did you come?"

Ron Brix said grimly, "To kill a man—if I can find him."

"A Mormon?"

"I reckon that's what he is."

The girl's voice was breaking. "Then I won't take you there!"

She was on the verge of hysteria, Ron recognized, but there was a hard stubbornness in him now. "You can't help yourself," he said. "You'd never make it alone. I'm going across. I'll comb your damn Mormon camps till I find the man I want."

Her strength gone, the girl burst out, "Then you're no better than the rest of them! Haven't you and your kind done enough to us already? All we want is a chance to live, but you won't even give us that!"

Ron Brix was tired, angry, and his mind was sorely disturbed. "I guess," he growled irritably, "the Mormons got nothing but what was coming to 'em."

"That's a lie!" she flung at him. "But you've done all you can to hurt us. We're leaving this country forever. We're going west, into the Rockies, or past them. We'll go so far no one will follow us! There'll be land there for us; there'll be a place to live. There won't be any mobs to burn us out, or tar-and-feather decent men. You'd like to see us wiped out or scattered. Well, we never will be!"

The lash of her words stung Ron, and he sneered, "You won't get your bunch of horse thieves and counterfeiters to go thirty miles into those mountains. Wait and see."

He rowed on stolidly after that, troubled and not fully understanding this thing that had happened to him. The cold was dulling his mind, stiffening his muscles. Back there in the rain-drenched night somewhere was the little farm he and his father had worked. He was rowing away from it, leaving it behind him. It seemed weeks ago that he had ridden away from it with Link Sawtrey—a boy looking for some fun. There hadn't been any fun, and he wasn't a boy any longer. He was a man, and his boyish eagerness had crystallized into a man's harsh purpose. But how he could achieve that purpose, or where, he didn't know.

What he did know was that he felt only contempt and hatred for Mormons, though the girl's outburst troubled him a little. They were a bad lot, he told himself; their projected journey into the West was a wild farce which would never come to pass.

And somewhere among them was the man who had murdered Jonathan.

It was not yet dawn when a low muttering from old Harper made Ron Brix turn his head. A few hundred yards off, red

fires were flickering feebly. With the last of his strength, he made for them, and sent up a hoarse shout.

Then the skiff was sliding in among rustling reeds. Men were calling, talking excitedly, crowding in around the boat. He tried to get up and was so stiff from the cold that he pitched on his face. Hands caught him, lifted him free.

He heard old Harper murmuring huskily, "Judy and me—we're all right. Take care of that boy, there. He's a mighty fine one."

Another voice exclaimed, "They're half froze, the lot of 'em. Doggone my hide, boys, if it ain't Harper!"

Lanterns were bobbing in the dark, and more men were running and shouting, "It's Harper! Eben Harper! Harper's here!"

Ron Brix was too tired to be curious or to care. He had meant to refuse Mormon food, but when they held a bowl of hot gruel to his lips he sucked at it. Then they were rolling him into warm blankets and, almost instantly, he fell asleep.

CHAPTER THREE

Trail Hostages

IT WAS late in the raw and sodden morning when he awoke. He had been placed in a tent, but the rain had leaked through and soaked his blankets and the ground under him. Hell of a place to put him, he thought.

He was shivering and his teeth were chattering and his face felt strangely hot. His head was aching viciously. He climbed to his feet awkwardly, clenching his teeth, and he had to fight to keep upright. The tent was whirling and dipping. He steadied it grimly, jerking his head so that his eyes would focus, and went outside.

Rain was still falling. He stood in it unheedingly, anger and contempt still holding sway in his mind, his glance roving over this spot that the sullen gray light now exposed. He was startled by what he saw.

It's misery and squalor pierced even the armor of Ron Brix's surly temper. Here were the last of the Mormons. Here was the remnant which had not made an early escape—the few hundreds driven by Link Sawtrey and the mob at the point of bayonets out of Nauvoo and across the Mississippi.

For protection against the driving rain and the early winter cold they had only a few ragged tents; some had rigged up makeshift shelters out of brush or blankets propped up on sticks; here and there were families huddled on the wet ground with only a leaky wagon box for a roof.

Scorn swept over Ron Brix's square face. Was this tattered company part of the army that was to storm the mountain barriers of the West? He thought of the thin, wheat-flavored gruel they had given him the night before. No kind of food for a weary, half-frozen man, but it was all they had, probably. They were starving here, huddled on the river bank like rats whose holes had been flooded.

The hammering in his head beat ruthlessly at his temples. One night of it here had given him a hellish fever. Half of these people, probably, were sick, dying. Precious few of them would ever hit the westward trail.

Dizzy and sick, he ran a work-callused hand through his short black hair. It would take more than a touch of fever to stop him, though. He'd get out of this hell-hole. There were more Mormons strung along all the way to the Missouri.

He'd told that girl he was going to comb the camps. Well, he would. They'd wait for him. Go west? He didn't believe it. That took guts. This collection of whipped and starving outcasts wouldn't go a thousand feet, much less a thousand miles. The man he wanted was here somewhere. He knew how to find him—and he would find him.

A hand laid against his arm made Ron

Brix stumble around. A bearded man in a torn coat gave him a friendly nod and said, "Brother, Eben Harper has been asking for you. If you'd like to come along—"

The man's face and the camp were slipping away out of focus of Ron's bloodshot eyes. Ron blurted, "Tell him to go to hell! I've got nothing to see him about."

It wasn't until then he saw the girl standing just behind the bearded fellow. And he wouldn't have recognized her if it hadn't been for the familiar ring of her voice as she murmured, "Thanks, Luke. I'll talk to him."

The bearded man turned away, and then Ron was facing her. He fought to subdue that raging hell in his head, setting his teeth against the weakness and the sickness sweeping over him. For a moment, he got a steady, straight look at her.

He hadn't seen much beauty in women, but this girl Judy Harper had it. A cloth was wrapped about her head, but under it a thick mass of fine brown hair shaded into a rich auburn. She stood with almost a defiant straightness, her wet dress clinging to the firmly molded curves of her figure. In her brown eyes was that same glow he had observed in the dark of the farmhouse, yet in them now was a vibrant disdain and anger.

"My father sent for you," she said clearly. "He doesn't know what kind of a man you are."

Shock after shock of pain beat against Ron Brix's temples. The details of the girl's face melted away. "Then tell him!" he croaked. "You know, don't you?"

The girl stamped her foot. "He won't believe me. He thinks he can trust you."

Ron Brix's laugh was a mocking gasp. "Trust me? When I'd like to see every Mormon horse thief and murderer strung up? Come along. I'll tell him!"

JUDY HARPER turned abruptly, and he went after her. His walk was a reeling, drunken stagger, and he cursed himself because his legs performed so leadenly. The muddy ground was tilting crazily; the surly gray sky overhead careened.

They came to a high-wheeled freight wagon. Eben Harper was lying under it, propped up on a blanket-covered heap of branches. His square-cornered steel spectacles seemed ridiculously huge; his gray-salted dark beard appeared to flow down over the whole of his chest. Ron planted his feet wide apart so that he wouldn't fall. There seemed to be a blistering heat to the rain; his face was burning up.

There was a hole in Harper's enormous beard. He was saying, "Why, son, you're sick. It's the fever. Maybe you better—"

"Sick, hell! I don't need any damned Mormon to tell me what to do. You wanted to see me, didn't you? Well, here I am."

Harper's gentle voice came faintly, from a great distance. "Yes, son, I wanted to see you. Wanted to thank you, for one thing. I waited too long on the other side, I reckon. Thought I could get money for these folks here. But that's past. There's wagons coming from Winter Quarters to pick us up. We'll winter there and then we'll be heading West. A new start, that'll be, and nobody to hinder a man from making his life a good one."

Ron Brix laughed bitingly. "You'll never get there. Your pack of murdering blacklegs won't even start!" The wagon seemed to Ron's fevered senses to have swollen till it towered over Ron's head; it seemed to be collapsing on him, like an undermined cliff.

Eben Harper was talking again. His words came in snatches, as if he were talking into the teeth of a stormy wind: "Yes, son, we'll get there. . . . Don't know just where the place is, but we'll find it. . . . You're not a Mormon, Judy told me. . . . Want you to think about going with us—new country—need straight young fellows . . . . Courage. . . . Nerve. . . ."

It seemed to Ron Brix that his head was exploding. Harper and the wagon and the camp swirled sickeningly. All the strength

had drained out of his limbs. He was weaving, about to fall, and he couldn't move his feet.

In a fury, he tried to lift a fist. "Damn you," he croaked. "Damn the whole bunch of you! I'll see you in hell 'fore I'll hook up with your outfit! Somewhere along here there's a murdering—"

But Ron Brix couldn't stand up any more. He couldn't see. Ragged pain was tearing through him. Out of a black void a voice said gently, "Reckon he didn't know how bad fever can be. He's a good boy. We got to keep him alive if we can."

He didn't feel anything when he hit the ground. . . .

For Ron Brix the weeks that followed were raging torment. During them he had lucid moments and clear impressions of what was going on around him. Most of the time he was tossing in the grip of delirium brought on by his illness. Incredible nightmares tortured him, and there were times when the reality he saw was so grim that he had trouble separating it from the tormenting, feverish visions.

He awoke lying on a blanket in the bed of a jolting wagon. The gray canvas tilt bloomed above him, and by turning his head he saw through the open end.

Sick as he was, the sight was a bitter one. Stained yellow to their hips, men were plodding through clinging mud, shoulders hunched and bent under heavy packs. The long, crawling line stretched back from the tail-gate like a stricken snake—jerking, halting, jerking on again.

There were some wagons, drawn by yoked oxen. There was a lumbering, swaying hay rack. There were farm carts, garbage carts from Nauvoo, two-wheeled trundles, wheelbarrows which were thrust along doggedly. Wagons mired. Bundles and packs were dropped; gaunt and weary shoulders heaved wheels free of the gumbo.

Women with sick children in their arms stumbled along, fell, were picked up and stumbled on again. Crawling wagons, mud-covered effigies of men who fought their way foot by foot, women with a courage that would not let them give up—all of them toiling on, ant-like, under a drab sky out of which rain poured relentlessly. The cold that pierced tattered clothing and blue flesh to the bone.

Day after day that picture turned up briefly and sickeningly in Ron Brix's moments of consciousness, to be swept away again by fever attacks and jumbled together with wild dreams.

There were other pictures: nights when fires leaped up into the darkness, and grim-jawed men moved about them like the ghosts of the damned in hell. Then there was the dirty, black-smudged dawn when men climbed into the wagon and lifted out the woman who had died beside Ron Brix. Their words: "This feller won't be long behind her."

But Ron Brix battled with a desperate fury against the death hovering under that wretched, patched bit of canvas. He had to live—he was was going to live!

Awakening from some twisted dream, his throat rasped from screaming, Ron Brix would tell himself that. Sometimes he half recognized the face bending over him—the face with the large brown eyes, framed by thick brown hair with a touch of red in it, which seemed to float just out of his reach. He associated that face with what little tenderness he received—the cool cloths on his burning forehead, the water he gulped down thirstily. Sometimes he whispered to that face of love; sometimes he raved at it. . . .

Bleak days merged with freezing nights. Ron Brix remembered passing through Mormon camps. At burned-over Garden Grove and at Mount Pisgah he tried to get up and out of the wagon, but when he was conscious he was too weak to move. He remembered the tents on the hills at Council Bluffs, and then, at last, the swirling, angry waters of the Missouri as they crossed it on Mormon-made ferryboats.

Those memories flashed through his mind as they lifted him down from the wagon. He had made it. This was Winter Quarters, the jumping-off place on the border of the wilderness.

He listened to his own shallow breathing as they laid him out on a bunk in a mud-and-pole cabin, wondering if he would ever get up on his feet again. He had never felt so weak. He closed his eyes and let himself drift. . . .

THERE was no longer that whirling confusion in his head when he awoke. His brain was very clear now, and the things he looked at weren't swollen or distorted.

Judy Harper was in the cabin. He had never really seen her before and now, watching her, he felt ashamed and embarrassed as if he were doing something he shouldn't. She saw him and came over to the bunk and stood looking down, a puzzled expression in her eyes.

Ron whispered huskily, "How long have I been here?"

"Two weeks. You're going to be all right. Go back to sleep now."

He tried to lift his hand in a negative gesture, but he couldn't lift it, so he went to sleep. There were more days when he awoke, and Judy Harper fed him or bathed him or rearranged his blankets to make him more comfortable. They talked very little. Ron was afraid to, and the girl seemed to avoid it. And always there was that strange, uncertain look in her eyes that he didn't understand.

Lying there, waiting for the slow return of his strength, Ron learned that old Eben Harper was a man of importance among the Mormons—a member of the Council of Twelve. During most of the day and a good deal of the night men trooped into the cabin to confer with Harper.

Unable to help himself, Ron Brix listened. He heard retold the horrors he had witnessed on the march from Poor Camp to Winter Quarters. He heard the plans for the future, and he could not understand why the hardships already endured had not throttled any desire to go on. For they were going on. There was this man Brigham Young, whom they all believed in. Brigham Young had promised to lead them to a new land in the West. It might be in the Rockies, it might be Vancouver's Island in the far Northwest, it might be California. No one knew.

Yet trust and a longing for peace were going to take them there. Ron Brix, weak and silent, couldn't mistake the resolve, the patience, the indifference to peril, the stubborn determination he saw in Eben Harper and the men who came to talk with him. They were going on.

In the spring a pioneer band was to be formed. The band was to explore the mountains, find a place to settle, and send back for the main body of Mormons.

Eben Harper, it seemed, was doing a hundred things—directing the building of wagons, overseeing the distribution of food, arranging for the planting of crops, imbuing others with his confidence, his unshakable purpose. It couldn't help but touch Ron Brix; the fervor of the old man's zeal was too strong, too honest, to be avoided.

Lying on his back day after day, with nothing to do but think, Ron Brix tried to reconcile this new view of the Mormons with what he had been taught to believe. It wasn't what he wanted to believe, yet there was no denying it. Scoundrels, rascals or horse thieves didn't lay plans to trek recklessly into a perilous, uninhabited country. Counterfeiters didn't risk their lives to reach a mountain-bound territory a thousand miles from nowhere. That took stout hearts, honesty and courage. Someone had lied, for these men had all those things—had them in abundance.

Nor was that the only problem that troubled Ron Brix. A conviction was gnawing at him—a conviction he fought as long as he could, and then gave in to. He loved Judy Harper. He had grown hungry for

glimpses of her. The touch of her slim hand on his forehand sent a trembling shock through him. Because of his murdered father, he struggled to maintain his hatred for Mormons—and found he couldn't. It was treachery, he thought grimly, but treachery he couldn't cast out of his mind.

As the weeks went by, there was still that remote, puzzled look in Judy Harper's brown eyes. When he tried to talk to her, she put him off. He wasn't strong enough yet to talk. Helpless, Ron Brix had to wait. And slowly the strength he needed began to return.

It was in December that he walked first. He tried it when no one else was in the cabin, tottering around the bunk by holding on to it. After that he worked at it a little each day.

He needed that strength sooner than he thought he would. Dozing late one morning, the sound of voices stirred him into wakefulness. He opened his eyes in time to see a lean, wiry figure go out of the door with Eben Harper. The slanting view he got of a dark, hawklike face made his blood pound.

Judy Harper was putting wood into the stove. Ron called to her huskily, and she came over to the bunk.

He said bluntly, "Who was that—there with Eben?"

Lines pressed themselves faintly into the smoothness of her forehead. "A man named Sawtrey," she told him. "Link Sawtrey. He's arranging for guides, for the trip."

CHAPTER FOUR

Wilderness Outcast

THAT turned up a fury of speculation in Ron Brix's head, but for the moment the nearness of this girl he loved overbalanced it. He reached out and took her wrist, and when she tried to pull away he was strong enough to hold her.

He stared at her, fumbling for words. She stood quite passively, though a flush had spread into her cheeks. In the gray morning light her hair was more a deep brown than auburn; it lay, fragrant and rich, against her white forehead and about her ears, soft and alluring. Her brown eyes were aglow, but he could see the deep trouble in them. It was almost as if she were struggling against something that was close to overpowering her.

"You've got to talk to me, now," he demanded hoarsely.

She whispered, "There's—nothing to talk about."

"I reckon there is. I been lying here, Judy, till I'm half crazy with it. I've got to tell you. I can't keep it back any longer."

Desperately she whispered, "No, Ron. Don't say it."

"I've got to, I tell you," he repeated. "I love you, Judy. I'd be a dead man now, if it hadn't been for you. I don't know when it started. When you were bringing me along from the Mississippi, maybe. I can remember you bending over me, and the way your hair looked, and the soft way your hands would touch me. And all the time lying here it's been torture, just watching you."

He stopped, and she didn't answer. He could see the hurt deep in her eyes. That sense of struggle, of denial, was strong and clearly written. Her eyes were wet, glistening.

Ron said huskily, "Maybe if you hadn't cared—you wouldn't have done all you have for me. Nothing's ever meant half to me what you do. I got to know, Judy, if I'm right or if I'm wrong."

Her lips were trembling a little, but she said, "What you want—can't ever be. Let me go now, please."

Her voice held a warmth that was torment, and Ron Brix clung to her wrist. Had she tried, perhaps, she might have released herself, but she didn't try.

"We got a bad start," he persisted, "coming across the river, and then in that

camp. Is that it—on account of that?"

"No," she said in a low tone, keeping her eyes from his.

"Maybe I said something while I was sick, out of my head. I was raving, part of the time. I remember saying things—"

She was looking at him queerly. "You told me about your father and—the man with—"

Ron Brix's square face was grim. "The man with bloody eyes," he finished when she didn't go on. "That was the only thing he told me before he died—that a man with bloody eyes had killed him. It didn't give me much to go on. It wasn't till afterwards I found out that the murderer was a Mormon."

Judy Harper cried quickly, "You can't be sure of that."

"I am. Dead sure. I'll show you."

His clothes were hanging on a nail over the bunk. Ron Brix took his hand from the girl's wrist, pulled them down. From a hip pocket of the homespun trousers he drew out the folded, blood-smeared page and handed it to Judy Harper.

"Look at it," he directed tightly. "The man who shot dad left it there by accident. Anybody who'd have the *Book of Mormon* with him—"

Judy took it, scanned it hastily. There had been a haunted look on her flushed face when she took it. That faded out, and when her head lifted she was angry.

"This isn't the real *Book of Mormon!*"

Ron Brix stared. "It's got to be," he blurted. "There's talk like the Bible in it, and up at the top it says—"

"But it isn't! The real *Book of Mormon* is just history. This is from a version gotten out by people who hated the Mormons and wanted to drive them away. It's full of lies and hateful things about us. No Mormon would carry it!"

Stunned, Ron Brix searched the girl's face. Was she saying this to trick him? Her anger was plain enough, yet if what she said was true, everything he had built up was crashing about his ears. The slender thread by which he might trace the murderer of Jonathan would be snapped.

If it were true, then Link Sawtrey had lied to him. But Link Sawtrey wouldn't have made that mistake, because he knew about those things.

GRAY mist filmed across Ron Brix's eyes. "How long has Sawtrey been here at Winter Quarters?"

"A little over two weeks."

"Been helping you out, has he, and plans to go along West with you?"

"That's what he told father."

Ron snapped. "I'm getting up. I got to see him."

There was a swift, desperate note in Judy Harper's voice. "You can't. You—you can't go outside."

"I reckon I can." He pulled the trousers under his blanket and began to put them on. "You don't know about it, but I been walking around here. Got my legs steady."

"I don't mean that. It—it wouldn't be safe for you to go out, right now."

Something in the urgency of her tone made him stop, stare at her. "I don't get you."

The girl was standing very straight, and her face was colorless. "You don't know everything that's happened here. You've got to remember what the Mormons have been through already. And they aren't through it yet. They know that. There are men who want to stop the Mormons, even now; keep them from going on. They want to see the Mormons broken up and scattered, so they can plunder them more than they already have."

Ron said slowly, "I don't see where I fit into that."

"My father," Judy Harper told him in a low voice, "is the only man in Winter Quarters who doesn't believe that's what you came across the Mississippi to do."

"They're crazy!" Ron Brix burst out.

"They don't think so. A lot of people heard the things you said that morning back at Poor Camp when you had the fever. They heard you screaming when you were out of your head in the wagon. They've been warned since that you led a gang attacking Mormon farms and settlements outside Nauvoo."

"That's a lie, Judy! You've got to believe—"

She was saying steadily, "You never explained what you happened to be doing at our farm—with those others."

"Judy," he said thickly, "that was right after I'd learned about my dad. I didn't know what it'd be like. I didn't know it'd be—what it was. Judy, you believe me, don't you?"

Ron Brix read then the reason for the hurt puzzlement deep in her eyes. It was doubt—doubt of him. And the chain of circumstances was such that she could believe nothing else.

She didn't look at him. Her glance fell away, and she murmured, "It would be better—if you didn't go out."

Anger took hold of him then—anger at Link Sawtrey's deception and at his present helplessness. Neither Judy nor her father had recognized Sawtrey back at the farmhouse. It had been too dark for that. If they had, Sawtrey wouldn't have been with them now. And Ron was glad that Sawtrey would be left for him to deal with alone.

He swung out of bed, fumbled for his boots and stood up, swaying a little. His big body was gaunted from long illness. A black beard matching his hair had sprung out on his cheeks and jaws. His gray eyes were deep and burning in their sockets.

"Damn 'em!" he shouted. "Let 'em think what they want to. I'll go outside, and nobody'll stop me!" He stamped to the door. Opening it, he turned back to Judy Harper. "I'm talking to Link Sawtrey if it's the last thing I do. Where can I find him? Where's he staying?"

The girl didn't answer

"Tell me where," he insisted, "or I'll pull this place apart looking for him!".

Judy Harper told him then, and he went outside.

The air was cold; it bit through his shirt, but he sensed the chill only dimly.

He began to walk. His glance flung, roving for the cabin he wanted.

This was the first clear glimpse he had had of Winter Quarters. It was a town of mud and log huts thatched with turf and willows or straw and dirt. On the side hills were a few makeshift dugouts. There was activity in the neat, orderly streets; men were hurrying purposefully. Ron heard the ring of a blacksmith's hammer and the sounds of lustily plied hammer and saw and axe.

Lips set grimly, Ron Brix shook off his weakness. Men were stopping to stare after him, but he went on, paying no attention. The harsh mutter of voices surged up in his wake, grew louder. Judy Harper had been right, then.

They were gathering behind him, calling out in voices held intentionally low. He didn't look back. To hell with them!

He got to the cabin he was looking for. A corner of the sod roof had caved in and been patched with branches and big cottonwood leaves. The door was a double layer of poles stuffed with straw. He pushed at it, stepped inside, and slammed it behind him.

A man lying on the bunk in the far corner straightened from the waist. He wore a coat, but under it his shoulders and torso looked sinewy. His hair was long, his face naturally dark and hawklike.

LINK SAWTREY stared for a moment, peering through black beard and uncut hair, beneath Ron's square, gaunt features. Then he blurted, "Why—why, howdy, kid. Damned if I recognized you, right at first. Heard you was here."

Ron Brix leaned against the door frame, trying to save his strength. He looked

carefully into Link Sawtrey's eyes. The irises were dark, almost black. The whites were a dead white.

Sawtrey swung up from the bunk. "I been meaning to look you up, kid. There's a proposition here I can use help with. There's money in it, kid—"

"To hell with that, Link. I want to find out about that sheet with the blood on it—out of the *Book of Mormon*, you said."

Sawtrey ran a tongue over thin lips. "Sure, that's what it was."

"You know damned well it wasn't! And you knew it then! I want to know why you lied to me about that."

"Easy, kid," Sawtrey warned, eyes narrowing. "Go easy on the hard names."

"She goes as she lays, Link. There's something damned funny about that. I aim to find out what."

Sawtrey shrugged. "Have it your way, kid. We wanted you to come along. We figured you were the only one could get close enough to put a slug in the old gent."

"Tricking me," Ron said angrily, "into doing your dirty killing for you."

A flush turned Link Sawtrey's thin face darker. "I told you once, kid—"

"And I reckon your proposition here is more of the same dirty business! You're aiming to stop these folks if you can, and scatter 'em, and then go on with the same kind of night-riding deviltry you had a hand in east of the Mississippi. That's the job you want help with!"

"Shut your face, kid," snarled Sawtrey.

But Ron Brix rushed on furiously. "Who was it told these folks I'd led a gang back there in Illinois? You, by God! So you could sneak in here and get 'em to trust you, fixing it so's they'd walk into a trap that'd smash 'em! Well, I'll spike that game for you!"

Link Sawtrey leaned forward in a crouch, glaring.

Ron snapped, "I'll tell 'em what kind of an outfit you were heading, back there. That page with the blood on it was a page out of a book you were carrying. That's tip-off plenty as to what your game was. You'll never stop this outfit, Link! They'll run you out of here. They'll—"

He stopped, abruptly. Link Sawtrey had taken two steps toward him, coming like a cat. Something in Ron Brix's staring, incredulous expression halted him in his tracks.

There was an instant of utter quiet in the cabin. Dimly, in the back of his head, Ron Brix could hear the stamp of boots outside, the rolling mutter of harsh voices. He heard that vaguely, then lost the sound of it. He was staring with all his concentration into Link Sawtrey's eyes.

Fury was boiling behind those pupils. That tension, that emotional strain, had shot blood through the whites. They were unnatural, swollen, crimson. It was as if little rivulets of blood were oozing out from under the lids.

The first shock of it drained out of Ron Brix's system, leaving him almost icily cold. He was sure, absolutely sure! There was this little log-and-mud room of a cabin, and he was in it and Link Sawtrey was in it. Sawtrey—who had murdered Jonathan Brix for the money old Brix was carrying to La Harpe!

"I never knew," he said very quietly, "what dad meant when he said that a man with bloody eyes shot him. When you're in a tight, Link, your eyes look bloody. And I'm paying off for that killin'!"

He pushed away from the door frame with his shoulders. He knew he was a fool as he did it, for he could barely stand up. And suddenly Link Sawtrey was coming at him with the power and drive of a battering ram.

RON tried to dodge but was too slow; he only partially evaded the charge. Sawtrey's shoulder hit him, spun him away. He jerked free of Sawtrey's grappling hands, got in two chopping blows. Sawtrey whirled and was on him again, slugging

savagely at his belly. He could see Sawtrey's strained, twisted face, the lips drawn away from his teeth, the crimson-streaked eyes glaring.

Ron took the battering, trying to keep in close. He tried to smash his fists into that twisted face, sobbing at his own helplessness and lack of strength.

Sawtrey's snarling words came to him: "You'll do no talking where you're going, kid!"

A heavy fist smashed into Ron's mouth; he reeled back on his heels, slammed against the table and hung there, panting for breath.

Sawtrey came running at him. Sawtrey wasn't going to hit this time. His fists weren't clenched; his fingers were curved. It was a death grip he wanted. Ron Brix, his head spinning, with no strength to match the raging desire in Sawtrey, saw and understood.

His groping hands blundered against a chair of split poles bound together with rawhide. With the last of his energy he gripped it, swung it over his head.

Link Sawtrey saw it swinging and dodged, but where planks would have given him firm footing, the dirt and rubble flooring did not. As he dodged he slipped and went off balance.

He rolled away with the lithe speed of a cat. With death staring him in the face, Ron Brix lurched after Sawtrey, aiming a finishing blow with the chair. He was reeling, half out on his feet, but he knew this chance was his last.

Sawtrey scrambled away, fear in his bloodshot eyes. He got halfway to his feet, and with Ron slashing at him with the chair legs, Sawtrey lunged for the door. He jerked it open, slithered out.

A roar of sound burst into the cabin, a sound that had been echoing dimly in the back of Ron Brix's mind. Too weak to make even a move at following, Ron suddenly stared out into a sea of grimly angry faces confronting him.

CHAPTER FIVE

Two Against the Mob

RON BRIX started to fall, caught himself against the frame of the opened door and clung there. The burst of energy he had summoned was gone. The sea of faces out there was spinning crazily. He tried to single out Link Sawtrey in the crowd, but Sawtrey was gone. He opened his mouth to shout to them to stop Sawtrey, but no words would come.

He was sick again, he thought, sick as he had been before with the fever, but he held desperately to the upright pole. He had to tell somebody. He had to get them to stop Link Sawtrey. Sawtrey was getting away.

But they were shouting things at him, all shouting at once. Couldn't they understand he was trying to tell them something important? He fought to gather strength enough to frame words, but even breathing was hard work.

A big red-bearded man surged out from the crowd that blocked the street.

"Yes, it's him!" he roared. "The coyote's come out of his hole!"

Like rifle shots out of a pistol fusillade Ron Brix picked stray shouts out of the seething confusion. "A job of hot pitch with a dose of feathers thrown in will keep him from shivering!"

"Pitch, nothing! Give him a taste of rope!"

"No! No! We're not murderers. But out of here he goes! He's robbed his last Mormon!"

The front rank of the crowd swept around Ron, swept him away from the door.

Brawny hands caught him roughly by the shoulders, but he was too far gone to feel any pain.

A voice in his brain was screaming that if they took him away now he would never live to find Link Sawtrey again. Beneath

his sickness and his dizziness that voice was screaming that he must explain; if they wouldn't listen he must fight his way into the clear. But he couldn't. The faces around him were a blur. If they hadn't been shouldering him so roughly, holding him up, he would have fallen.

Then suddenly they stopped moving with him. The yelling was dying out. The crowd had halted and was shuffling uncertainly in the cold street.

Ron Brix strained to clear his vision. The crowd was splitting, and Ron dimly made out a girl running toward them, brushing between men who moved out of the way for her. In a moment of clarity he glimpsed her face, white and frightened, and her auburn hair, loose from its confining ribbon and floating down to her shoulders.

Judy Harper whirled as she reached him, shielding him from the crowd. She cried out sharply, "You can't do this! We aren't killers. He'll die if you touch him now!"

The red-bearded leader answered her, his voice scornful. "We weren't going to kill him. We'd just give him a lesson to carry back to his friends!"

"He isn't an enemy of ours," she lashed back desperately.

"I reckon we know different, ma'am. We know the kind of devil's work he did back in Illinois, and why he's here. His kind are rotten to the heart. Leave him here in Winter Quarters, and the poison in him'll spread through the whole camp."

"I tell you you're wrong! He's not what you think."

"Ma'am, you're a lady, and—"

"I'm a Mormon!" Judy Harper flung out. "You know me and you know my father. We guarantee this man!"

There was quiet through the street, and then the red-bearded man said sternly, "If you want this man so bad, you can have him. But mark you, he'll be yours and no one else's in this camp or any other Mormon camp."

In Ron Brix's ears there was a dim, receding bluster of talk. The darkness that had been sweeping at him in waves now plunged wholly over him. He sensed that hands were supporting him; then he knew nothing more. . . .

HIS senses returned slowly, as if he were snatching them bit by bit. The bunk and the blankets were familiar. It was dusk in the cabin, and the room was filled with shadows. One of them moved, and as he studied it that shadow, too, grew familiar.

"Judy," he whispered. "Judy, come here."

She came slowly, reluctantly. He couldn't see her face as she stood there, but from the sound of her breathing he knew that she was sobbing.

"I reckon," he said huskily, "when you kept 'em from throwing me out this mornin' I got the answer I wanted."

Quick, bitter pride was in her voice. "That was no answer! I hate you and everything you stand for! I always will! I helped you because they might have killed you. I would have done the same for a hurt cow."

Bitter himself, Ron Brix said, "Those were your peace-loving Mormons!"

"Do you blame them? After what they've been through?"

"Judy, listen to me—"

But she turned wordlessly and ran out of the cabin.

Ron Brix could only lie there, cursing helplessly. Then gradually he came to an understanding of the girl's action. She loved him; the urgency and the strength of her plea for him there in the street could have meant nothing else. Yet that admission had shamed her, for she loved a man trusted by no one else in the Mormon camp. She herself, probably, did not yet trust him wholly. And now, because she had been shamed, Judy Harper hated him. . . .

It was the next day that old Eben Harper came to him. And again his bent shoulders

and tired eyes reminded Ron Brix of Jonathan.

"Son," Eben said gently, "that was a bad piece of luck yesterday. I'd hoped to get that straightened out before you got on your feet. Sometimes, though, the Lord's way is a queer way; we don't always see the why of a thing. I'm hoping now you won't quit."

Ron Brix's voice was a whisper. "I can't quit now."

"That's a thing I'm mighty glad to hear. I'm going with the first of 'em. I wanted you with me."

The old man pulled up a chair and sat down. The white in his beard had spread out during these early months of the winter so that now there were only flecks of dark in it.

"Remember that day when you came riding up?" he asked. "I kind of figured what you'd come for—I'd been expecting it—but you were just a boy, and I liked the look of you. Judy now—Judy's all I have. But she's a girl, and I'd wanted a son. When you came riding up that day, I looked in your face and I didn't see any bad in it. If I'd had a boy, I'd have wanted his face to look like yours."

Something about the old man's gentleness brought Ron Brix the words he needed. He told him about Jonathan and the way he had died, and about Link Sawtrey and the raid, and the scrap of bloodstained paper, and then at last about the scene with Link Sawtrey in the cabin here in Winter Quarters.

Eben Harper listened patiently through it and at last he nodded his gray head slowly.

"Things happen like that," he said. "A man's life gets twisted, and the way he gets the kinks out shows what kind of a man he is. Maybe you're through with your kinks, son; maybe you're not. Anyhow, I'm glad you'll be going with us. I'll fix it for you to travel with the wagons in the spring."

Ron Brix wondered, after he had left, if the old man had meant more than he had said. Maybe old Eben Harper knew why, really, he was going on into the West.

Ron had felt at first only consuming disappointment at having let Link Sawtrey slip away from him. For Sawtrey was gone from Winter Quarters—Ron had asked about that with grim eagerness. It was certain that Sawtrey wouldn't go back and give up his quest. He had been willing to do murder to carry out his scheme to stop the Mormon trek. He might alter that plan, but he wouldn't give it up, nor would he risk a return to Winter Quarters. He would aim his new attack, most probably, at the pioneer band. Let that project be wrecked, and in its ruins would perish the hope and spirit of the Mormons.

Somewhere along the Mormon trail into the West, Link Sawtrey would be waiting. And there Ron Brix would meet him. . . . .

FOR another month Ron Brix held to his bed. This time his strength returned more quickly. When he was on his feet again the weeks rolled by with a swiftness that astonished him. Winter Quarters was humming with activity. Carpenters were sawing tree trunks into planks for the wagons. Forge-fires roared as blacksmiths hammered out new wagon tires, plowshares, nails. Green timber was boiled in salt water for spokes and felloes. Women were busy weaving homespun cloth for their men, knitting, making leggings from deer and elk skins; fashioning willow baskets for market.

In spite of himself, the eagerness and hope of that company that had endured so much got into Ron Brix's blood. For the first time he saw Brigham Young—a compact, well-knit man of medium height, massive of forehead, thin-lipped, with gray eyes that conveyed a sense of striking power.

Watching him, Ron Brix could understand the tremendous influence he held over this oppressed people. He was quiet, im-

perturbable, utterly sure of himself. They would have followed him into a grave. But he promised no graves. He promised a new land, a land of freedom, somewhere along the wilderness trail ahead.

It was in April that the boiling excitement of preparation reached its height—and they were ready. The moment was a tense one, for no one doubted that on the success or failure of the pioneer band hinged the fate of the Mormons. Where the long trek would end, no one knew. Brigham Young said only, "I will know the place when I see it." And they believed him.

On the fourteenth of April, seventy-three wagons rolled westward from the Elkhorn rendezvous beyond Winter Quarters. In that party seeking a haven for the thousands behind them were one hundred forty men and three women. Judy Harper rode beside her father, pride holding her head high, pride holding the smile to her lips when there was no smile in her heart. Ron Brix strode ahead on foot, the strength of his youth in him again, but his gray eyes hard, his square face lined and grim.

No one wanted him here; that had been made plain enough. He swore to himself that he didn't care—but he did. The youthfulness in his life was fading. He was building a makeshift existence around the bitter core of his hatred for Link Sawtrey, his desire for vengeance.

It was a noble company—a desperate and a pitiful one—that pioneer band of men and women plodding toward the west, to face they knew not what.

CHAPTER SIX

Bushwhackers

AT THE rate of twenty miles a day the wagon train gnawed its way into the treeless plain. Along the Platte River, up the North Fork, and a rough five hundred miles of monotonous rolling over barren prairie. The Loup was crossed in specially constructed leathern boats. As they forged into Indian country, pistols and muzzle-loading rifles were passed out to every man

Discipline was strict, vigilance complete At night the wagons were drawn into a semicircle on the river bank, tongues pointing out, the forewheel of one against the hind wheel of the next. A bugle call awoke the train at five. Prayers were said, breakfast eaten, and a bugle call again at seven sent the wheels to rolling once more.

Grim stubbornness was evident in those who gathered around the fires at the night camps—a hardy, unswervable determination.

Sitting alone, shunned and ignored, Ron Brix wondered about that. Now the wagon train feared only natural perils. Yet as the days drifted by, Ron's conviction that they would meet Link Sawtrey grew stronger. It lay in his mind steadily, implacably. He had come here to kill Link Sawtrey. That was the one thing left for him to do.

His love for Judy Harper was a torment he fought to suppress. Her broken pride had opened a gulf between them too wide to be spanned. Each day of silence increased the breach. He had given up hope of healing the wound.

Yet in spite of himself his eyes sought her out hungrily. She had been hurt and was as lonely as he. Because she was Eben Harper's daughter she was granted the respect of the train, but little friendliness was added to it. Ron Brix knew that he had caused that.

Sometimes at night she talked with her father. Sometimes in the soft dusk she walked by herself to the outskirts of the camp or along the whispering river. If there was danger in that she was heedless of it. And sometimes, unable to endure his apprehension, avid for even a torturing glimpse of her, Ron Brix followed her at a distance. Soon enough he would lose even that little bitter comfort. For he had made up his mind that if he met Link Sawtrey and lived, he was going back. . . .

It was at Fort Laramie, on the Platte's North Fork, that Ron Brix got his first word of Sawtrey. The train camped nearby. Eben Harper and two others of the Council rode to the fort. When they returned Harper singled out Ron and sat with him at the rim of the flickering circle of firelight.

It was a long time before he spoke. He polished methodically at his square-cornered spectacles which the flames coated with a crimson sheet.

He said at last, "You were right, son. Sawtrey's been here."

Sitting hunched with his arms about his knees, Ron Brix didn't move. He asked, "How long ago?"

"He's been in and out of the place. Came here, near as I can make out, right after he left Winter Quarters. If he wasn't bad before, he's turned bad since."

"He ain't dead?"

"No. Maybe it'd be better if he was. He hooked up with a couple of renegade half-breeds. On his way out here he got mixed up in a deal to bring in rotgut liquor. He's been stirring up the Injuns. He was drunk most of the time he was here, and he made his talk about getting together an Injun army big enough to wipe out the Mormons when they came through."

Ron said grimly, "Whiskey talk. He'll make trouble, but he can't do much."

Eben Harpen got to his feet heavily. "Maybe not. A warning ought to be plenty. You've given us that."

THE wagon train pulled away in the morning, and west of the fort, in the mountains, made camp for a longer stay. Laramie was a week behind them, and ferries had to be built for another river crossing. Horses and mules were badly in need of rest, and a supply of meat for the rest of the journey was needed.

Scouts brought in reports that no hostile Indian sign had been seen. If there had been doubts, those doubts were lulled. Perhaps Ron Brix was the only man whose suspicions remained unimpaired. Sooner or later, he knew, the break would come. He was waiting for it.

But the break came so mildly that he didn't know it had come until it was too late. A fire leaped and roared by the circle of wagons, picking a little spot of light out of the forested slopes of the rimming hills.

From the corner of his eye Ron saw Judy Harper, alone as he was. He didn't dare to look too steadily at her. In the dusk and the light of the fire, her dress was a warm splash of light color.

The dusk had deepened almost into night when he looked up again. He missed the splash of color. Turning his head to look directly at her then, he saw that Judy Harper was gone, and he swung to his feet, catching up the rifle between his knees. Farther off in the darkness he thought he saw a twinkle of light cloth. She had gone for one of her walks, probably. He sidled after her, treading lightly.

A few of the saddle horses were picketed in a rope corral a little distance from the wagons. On speculation, Ron Brix swung past them. Judy Harper's favorite dun pony was missing.

Ron swore under his breath. The girl was a fool. Hastily he flung up the first saddle that came to his hand, cinched it down and mounted.

A valley and a half-broken trail led south from the encampment. He turned his horse into it, a tightness rising in his throat. He covered five hundred yards at a gallop, then stopped to listen. The mountains around him were still and black against the dark night sky. Wind rustled through pine branches in a mocking whisper.

Then faintly to his straining ears came another sound. It might have been one of a dozen forest noises—and it might have been the frightened cry of a woman, choked off before it was fully uttered. He whirled toward it, and was aware then that a running horse was coming up fast behind him.

Pulling around, he saw the dim outline of the rider coming at him. That would be Judy, he thought, and he'd send her back. The rider was full on him before he recognized that the figure in the saddle was too large to be the girl's.

The horse brushed up against his; the rider leaned toward him and the hard circle of a pistol muzzle was pressed into his ribs.

"All right, Brix," a voice said. "Far enough."

"Who is it?" he snapped.

"Brucker. I been watching you, mister, figuring you'd try to pull a fancy one. Like to put us in a hole, wouldn't you? What's your game? Who you meeting here, and what for?"

Ron swore. Earl Brucker was the red-bearded Mormon who had held him by the shoulders in the street at Winter Quarters. "You damned idiot," he cried, "put your gun away. Judy Harper rode this way. I heard her scream up yonder a minute ago. Something's happened."

"Hogwash," Brucker growled. "Hold steady or I'll put a slug through you. You're riding back to camp with me. Now."

Seconds were going fast. Sure now that it was Judy's voice he had heard, savagely torn by the implications of it, Ron felt hot wrath boil into his head.

He jerked recklessly away from Brucker's pistol and yelled, "Damn your Mormon guts! She's up there, I tell you! I'm going after her if I have to kill you to do it! Put that gun down and get the hell out of my way!"

Brucker slipped the pistol back into his waistband. "You win, Brix. I had to make sure. Come along."

Ron scarcely heard him. He had sent his horse plunging past Brucker and on up the trail. Brucker clattered behind him, calling, "Easy, man—this trail's hell. You'll be no use to her dead!"

It was, actually, next to no trail at all. A rocky slope, twisting in and out of the shrouding timber, it bent around gorge heads, wound precariously upward. With his heart storming in his chest, Ron Brix sent his mount hammering at it. The night held close and black around him, an impenetrable and treacherous blanket.

Behind him was the scrape and rattle of hoofs, and the anguished sound of Brucker's voice, pleading for caution.

THERE was reason for that. One instant, low-hanging branches were lashing Ron Brix's face. The next there was none; the muscles of his horse were bunching in a frenzied, panic-stricken effort.

The meaning of that registered on Ron's mind in a stabbing flash. He flung himself to the left, out of the saddle, as the pony's withers dropped out from under him.

His clawing fingers caught around roots and a small pyramid of rock, while he clung there with the pony's terrified scream ringing through his brain. It seemed long minutes before he heard the sickening thud as the horse struck far below him.

Then there was Brucker's voice, crying, "Brix! For God's sake, Brix, where are you?"

"Give me a hand up," he gasped. "I'm all right."

Brucker hauled him back, said shakily, "You crazy, Brix? If Judy's up here—"

"She didn't come of her own accord, damn it! Someone's got her!"

"Who?"

Ron, staring up into the blackness ahead, didn't reply.

Brucker snapped, "Whoever it is, it's a cinch he can't make any better time than we can. There was a moon last night. It'll be up again pretty quick now, and we can get on with it."

"We'll go ahead anyhow, as fast as we can."

Brucker said, "Sure," and then his voice stopped. When he spoke again there was a sneering quality in it. "Oh. I'm getting

the hang of it now. Harper told me about you and Sawtrey. You figure it's Sawtrey we're after. Judy don't matter; she could be up here dead and you wouldn't bat an eye. But you're willin' to risk your rotten neck to get Sawtrey!"

Ron answered bitterly, "I'm goin' on. Come along or stay behind. I don't give a damn which."

He turned, skirting the drop, and began to follow the meager trail at a half run, carrying his rifle across his face to ward off any brush from his eyes.

Presently there was a luminous glow above the serrated rim, and a yellow full moon pushed itself away from the last peak to float in a clear, dark sky. Now they had light to see by.

The valley was tapering, and the trail crawled up along the left side of it. No other route, apparently, could have been followed. To the west lifted rocky slopes studded with wind-tortured pines; to the east a winding, sheer-sided ravine slit the valley's center.

For better than an hour Ron Brix trotted in the lead. While there was light enough to see, there was no light for studying sign, and he wasted no time at it, confident that no other way was possible, while Earl Brucker rode after him, silent and contemptuously wrathful.

After an hour or so, Brucker grunted out a warning. Ron had seen enough for himself to know what they were running into. Ahead, the valley broadened into a little park. At its farther end, rock ledges strewn with pine rose in tiers to a lesser summit. The ravine petered out to a sheer, deep crevice at its lower end.

If they were to be ambushed this was the place for it. Ron hesitated only an instant. No artifice would carry them across that park. It must be a rush or nothing. He broke into a run, zigzagging as he went. He didn't look behind, or care what Brucker was doing, but he heard the drum of hoofs coming up behind him.

The horse passed him. Brucker was leaning bow in the saddle, his pistol, and Ron Brix had time for the flashing judgment that the Mormon didn't lack courage A hundred yards they covered, then two hundred. Brucker was within fifty feet of the lowest rock shelf.

CLEAR and sharp, through the singing of the wind in the trees, came the burst of a rifle shot. As if it had tripped on an invisible wire, Brucker's pony spilled over in a somersault. Brucker pitched clear and rolled with the looseness of a man half stunned.

Ron Brix cursed, and with the breath sobbing in his lungs tried to run faster. Brucker was a clear target in the moonlight; another shot would finish him. Still seventy-five yards from the shelf, he saw Brucker up ahead, crawling clumsily to his hands and knees, then staggering upright. The Mormon had just gained his feet when the rifle on the shelf spat again. Ron caught another splash of flame and Brucker spun down on his face.

Brucker had been racing straightaway, but Ron, a smaller, weaving figure in the moonlight, was a vastly more uncertain target, and he knew it. His attention riveted ahead of him, he didn't see the naked form running through the trees to the western edge of the park. Nor did he hear the twang of bowstring or see the glint of moonlight on the polished arrow as it streamed toward him.

Two inches higher and the arrow would have pierced him through the neck. As it was, the flint head struck him in the right shoulder and crushed in under the collarbone. The shock of it knocked him off his feet and probably knocked him out of the bullet ripping out from the shelf.

He rolled swiftly into a brushy depression, snapping off the protruding wood of the arrow as he did it. Another arrow whispered over his head. For the moment, at least, the Indian was more of a menace than

the man on the shelf. Ron swung his rifle around to the west.

The Indian was no more than a shadowy silhouette against the dark forest background. Another arrow fitted, he had left the woods and was coming up like a panther. Ron got his bead, squeezed the trigger carefully.

For an instant everything was blotted out by sickening pain as the rifle stock kicked against the buried arrowhead in his shoulder. When he could see again, the Indian was gone. There was no sound from the shelf. Crouching low, Ron reloaded. Then he went out of his brush-lined depression like a rabbit out of its hole.

The gun on the shelf stabbed flame, but the bullet missed. Ron Brix marked the spot and with his teeth set, leaped for it, twisting, sprinting, dodging.

He reached the huddled Brucker, heard him groan feebly as he passed him. Ron drew another bullet there. The slug sliced along his cheek and laid it open from cheekbone to the turn of his jaw. The sting of it sent a hard, deadly satisfaction rushing through him. The gunman on the shelf had wasted his chance. If he were fast enough, he could reach the shelf before the gunman had time to reload.

Gasping, calling for the last of his flagging energy, he made straight for it. Blindly in the shadowed darkness he jumped for the shelf, caught it with the fingers of his left hand, found a toehold, and lunged over, his rifle ahead of him.

A warped pine hung low there, shadowing the spot as he scrambled to his knees. The place, it seemed, was empty; the gunman must have fled after that last shot rather than risk being caught with his rifle unloaded. Ron fought his sobbing breath, listening. Faintly he picked up the thud of a boot, the clink of shod hoof on rock.

He was up, plunging toward it, when he tripped on something soft. Kneeling in the deep shadows his hands touched a face and fine silk-like hair. It was Judy Harper, her hands and feet tied and a gag bound across her mouth. He fumbled at the knots, finally jerked them loose.

She cried out, "Ron!" and he wondered how she had known it would be he. There was a swift demand, a pleading, in her voice. "Ron, something terrible—"

But there was another thing burning implacably in his mind. He said instantly and savagely, "It was Sawtrey, wasn't it?"

"Yes, but there's something else! Ron, wait!"

He finished loosening the knots binding her ankles when a sound caught his attention. He stood up and turned away from her toward the clatter of scrambling hoofs from above. That would be Link Sawtrey, riding his own horse and leading the girl's. Link Sawtrey was getting away!

CHAPTER SEVEN

Pursuit

A MAN on foot could make better work of those tiers of rock than a horse. If he could only beat Sawtrey to the top and wait there for him—wait for the showdown that would culminate almost a year of bitterness and defeat!

He cried harshly, "This is the finish. I'll be back to pick you up."

Then Judy Harper was up too. She caught his arm with both hands. They were out from under the tree, and the moonlight flowed against her anguished white face.

"Ron, what happens to me doesn't matter. It's the wagon train!"

He had started to jerk his arm away, but something in her tone held him from it. "The wagons?" he growled. "They're safe enough."

"No! This was a trick! Don't you see? Sawtrey boasted to me about it."

He blurted, "It was trick enough to take you! But that's done with!"

"I don't mean that. It was a trick to split up the wagons. We've been too strong for

him. But Sawtrey knew that when they found out I was gone they would send out searching parties. Half the men, or more, will be out combing these hills. Don't you see? Sawtrey has his Indians ready. They're going to attack the wagons and burn them, and then ambush the searching parties. They'll wipe us out, Ron! Someone's got to warn them!"

He understood then, but he said roughly, "A few minutes won't make any difference. I'll be back in time."

"You may not come back," she said simply.

That was true enough, for there was an even chance that Sawtrey would kill him. Until now he hadn't cared about that. His desperate desire to finish up the matter of Jonathan's death had obliterated any concern for himself or for the others. If he died, he believed that he would be well out of a life that had turned bitter and hateful.

Yet this life, he now suddenly realized, was not entirely his own to do with as he chose. It had become bound inextricably with others. He swore helplessly. The fate of all the Mormons, perhaps, rested on his shoulders. That of the pioneer band certainly did, and upon those seventy-three wagons were pinned the hopes of the thousands left behind.

Ron Brix told himself grimly that he didn't care. The Mormons hated him. They distrusted him. They had been, once, on the verge of beating him and driving him out to die. He had endured all that only to gain his chance at Link Sawtrey. And now . . .

Try as he would, he couldn't forget what he had seen on the road from Poor Camp; he couldn't forget the courage and the hardship and the undying hope he had met with in Winter Quarters; he couldn't forget old Eben Harper, who trusted him.

If he went to the summit of these rocky tiers, and didn't come back, the girl would be left alone with a man badly wounded or dying. She would never make it back in time to warn the wagon train, if she could make it at all.

Judy Harper's voice came to him quietly. "I think we're cut off from the camp by now. Sawtrey's renegades—"

He shook his head. "It doesn't matter. I'll get through. If your folks haven't scattered yet, I'll keep 'em from it. But I'll have to leave you here with Brucker."

They had left the shelf and found Brucker trying to drag himself to them. He had been shot through both legs; the bones were broken and the wounds were bleeding badly. There was a dull, relentless ache running through Ron's shoulder now, but with Judy's help he picked up Brucker and carried him to the eastern edge of the park, in a shelter under the trees. For a moment he stood watching Judy work to stop the bleeding.

"Heard you say—you were going down," Brucker gasped. "I got—my pistol, so we'll make out. God's luck to you—Brix."

Ron said steadily, "I'll leave my rifle, too, in case you need it. I won't have any use for it. I'd rather travel light." He didn't explain that another kick from the stock against his injured shoulder would have knocked him out.

He stripped off bullet pouch and powder horn and tossed them down. Judy Harper's white face was turned toward him, but he was trembling and unsure of himself, and all he said was, "Stay here till an hour after dawn. If nobody's come for you by then, it won't be any use staying longer."

Then he turned and went off at a trot down the valley. He didn't look back.

THE moon was bright, icily cold. The wind had stopped stirring the pine branches, and there was no sound at all but the muffled pad of his footfalls.

He had a long way to go, and he held his pace down, though a devil in his brain shouted for a mad, headlong run. Every movement of his right arm sent lances of pain dating through his shoulder. He tried

holding it tightly against his side and across his chest. That helped a little, but it made running awkward.

He came to the head of the ravine and trotted out along an obscure trail that skirted it. There overhanging trees made patches of dark; roots caught at him, strove to trip him. He had been tired when he started; he stopped for a minute or two to rest, panting. In spite of the rest, when he went on, his muscles had lost their spring.

He had trouble now keeping his head from spinning. The pain and the weakness from loss of blood climbed up into his brain, throbbing there. How far had he come? Halfway? It must be more than that. It seemed as if he had been running for hours. His legs were leaden and awkward; he had to keep forcing them to do what he wanted.

Then at a sudden sound he stopped, fighting to quiet his hammering breath. Horses were coming up the trail, between him and the camp!

He remembered what Judy Harper had said. These were some of Sawtrey's renegades, probably, coming up to set their ambush at the valley's head.

Ron Brix worked his way to the edge of the ravine. He couldn't go back; he couldn't stay here. He stared down. The moon obscured this side; if there were footholds or ledges to aid a descent, they were invisible. Bad as the chance was, he had to take it. He swung his legs over, lowered himself with his good arm. His floundering feet found support. He clung there, fumbled for another hold, found it and lowered himself again.

Thirty feet below, his boots hit firm sand just as the scraping of unshod hoofs passed above him. He waited, counting the minutes, until the sounds had faded. Then he began to run again down the ravine.

He had taken no more than twenty steps when a cry rang against his ears. Behind him a trade gun banged, and the racket echoed and rolled between the walls. A guard left along the trail had spotted him, or one of the renegade party had turned for a final look to the rear. At any rate they were after him. There were no more yells after that first one. They were coming back, but as quietly as they could. Very faintly Ron could hear the chunk of their hoofs.

Though it was torture, he broke out of his trot. He couldn't save himself any longer. It was run or die with an arrow or a bullet in his back.

He had a start of a good three hundred yards. While the Indians were mounted, the trail along the rim was treacherous. If they tried speed, one or more of them would go plunging over it to a mangled death. It was even, or nearly so. It would remain even as long as his legs held out.

Ron Brix lost track of how far he had come and how far he had to go. His lungs beat and thundered against his ribs, and still would not draw in enough air to satisfy his screaming muscles. He was stumbling, staggering, lurching down that black ravine, plowing through sand that sucked at his boots. His shoulder was a bloody hell of agony. His legs were lifeless stumps, unwieldy things that moved though he had no power over them.

But they moved, in an insane, stumbling madman's run that kept up long after energy and strength were gone and only will remained.

Guns were crashing thunderously behind him. He considered that stupidly, still running. They had been quiet before, so as not to alarm the camp. Why were they so careless now? The reason got through his thick, hampered thoughts. He must be near the camp! The Indians were afraid he was going to make it. He'd make the camp. By God, he would make it!

Then he saw the wagons, and the men running out from them toward him. He fell, but they were helping him up.

He heard someone grunt, "Oh, hell, it's that coyote Harper's been pampering. Too bad them redskins didn't get holt of him!"

CHAPTER EIGHT

Last-Stand Fight

RON BRIX fought to force words out of his throat. He was choking and they wouldn't come. Indifferent hands carried him inside the circle of wagons. Blazing fires that rolled back the dark tossed their heat against his face.

Then kindly old eyes behind square, steel-rimmed spectacles were close to him, and he recognized the full gray beard of Eben Harper. "What's the trouble, boy? Judy? I been looking for her. She's gone."

"Injuns," Ron Brix gasped out of a throat that felt as if knives were slashing it. "Sawtrey's aiming—to hit the camp. Get 'em—ready for it!"

Eben Harper was towering over him, thundering out staccato commands. Eben Harper believed in him, and he had authority. There in the dark the Mormon camp looked weirdly unreal as it came to life. Half-clothed men spilled out of the wagons, gripping rifles.

Tortured by his wounds and by weakness, Ron Brix lay and watched it. Off somewhere in the dark a gun began to bark—a sharp, steady chain of sound. All at first appeared to be senseless confusion. Shouts lifted in a hopeless jumble; fires crackled and roared; the beating of shod hoofs surged through the camp as the horse and mule herd was driven from its grazing ground.

Eben Harper came plodding back with a bottle and tilted it to Ron's lips. The bite of it in his raw throat told him that it was whiskey. He heard old Harper muttering, "There's uses for liquor besides making a man drunk. You need it, son. Feel like you can talk now?"

Out of what seemed to be mad chaos, order came swiftly. A detachment was kicking out the fires. Others set about rapidly hobbling the horses and mules which had come streaming into the enclosure. Drilled squads of riflemen strung out under wagon boxes. In the last of the light from the dying flames a man ran across the open space crying, "There's a hull nest of 'em on the south! Get men over there!"

Squads wheeled and trotted to the southern wagon battlement. Immediately long guns began to snarl in a furious, crackling outburst. Link Sawtrey had changed his plans, Ron thought. The chance of surprise was gone; there would be no scattered searching parties to ambush. So Sawtrey was hurling his renegades at the camp, hoping to batter through it before the defenders could settle themselves.

Anger swept through Ron Brix because what he had already done was not enough. Perhaps if he hadn't let Sawtrey slip through his fingers . . . But he shook that notion out of his head. If he had met Sawtrey up there on the rim and failed to hold him or kill him, the camp would have been utterly lost. He tilted up the bottle again, and the fire of the whiskey mounted through his weary muscles. There was fighting to be done, and he had to help with it.

Dawn was not far off. Now in the hovering darkness savage sound boiled up from the encampment. There was the drumming of exploding guns; men were shouting hoarsely; Indian cries shrilled through the night; smoke from the extinguished fires blended with burned powder to hang in a stifling pall among the wagons; horses were stamping, snorting, surging.

Ron Brix tried to get up. The shocking pain of that arrowhead in his shoulder made him sink back with a gasp.

Old Eben Harper was bending over him, muttering, "Judy, man! What's become of her?"

"Get a knife," Ron gritted between his teeth. "This arrow in my shoulder—get it out and I can handle a gun."

AS THE spectacled, gray-bearded Mormon knelt over Ron, probing for the arrowhead, Ron gripped a pistol in his

two hands, and fired at the leaping shadows. When the caps were exhausted, he jerked out the tale of what had happened. Judy and Earl Brucker were safe enough for the moment. What became of them would depend on what happened here at the wagons.

Harper croaked, "You'd best lie quiet. You're bleeding through the bandage, son. You'll chance bleeding to death."

But knowledge that Judy Harper was off in the night, waiting, was a pillar of flame in Ron Brix's heart. In his feverish madness he cursed Eben Harper and crawled to his feet. The love he had denied was a ripping, slashing torment. And there was more to it than that—a queer, vague quirk in his mind that swayed him powerfully.

He had been through too much with the Mormons to quit them now, while they battled tensely, desperately for their lives. It was Jonathan Brix's dying that had brought him here. Jonathan's dying had been planned, perhaps, for this. Jonathan's death might be balanced if he helped these men and women he had cursed and maligned. It might wash from him the bitterness of his hatred for Link Sawtrey.

He struggled up and went at a staggering run for the rim of wagons, flinging himself down there. There was another gun for him, in the hands of a man who would never use it again. He had to pry away the fingers, resolute even in death.

Gray, murky light was sifting over the tree-studded hills on his left. There were targets out beyond—scudding, shrieking figures that loosed a hail of snicking arrows and musket slugs against the wagons. Ron Brix shot, reloaded and shot again. He tore away half of the dead man's coat to make a pad for his shoulder. The racket about him was a ragged, nerve-shredding blast of sound.

Someone near him was groaning, a muffled, monotonous sound. Mortally hit by a stray arrow, a horse in the enclosure had burst its hobbles and screamed as it made a panicky, blundering effort to escape. Powdersmoke swirled away in streamers, searing gasping lungs, fiercely stinging eyes already bloodshot and weary.

Ron Brix rubbed at them with his fist, callous to the hurt. He had to see; there were bobbing darting figures to be lined in the groove of his sights.

By his side a husky, bearded Mormon growled, "Here they come again. They quit last time."

Yes, they were coming. An uneven line, some mounted and some on foot, had sprung out of the woods. They came in a leaping, yelling charge, furious and savage. Naked, clouted demons, sprinting like deer, crouching forward like panthers. There were feathers in the twisted top-knots of some. In the surly gray of the dawn there was no burnish to the red of their muscled bodies; theirs was the dull, rusty color of metal that has lain long in the weather.

In the din and the writhing confusion they struck at the wagons curled against them, beat at them like a bloody-knuckled fist against a shuddering door. It seemed as if the wagons themselves were recoiling under the roaring impact of that charge. Ron Brix shot, saw a scar-faced warrior with the teeth of a horse spill forward and plunge head foremost into the hub of a wagon wheel. No time to reload. He was scrambling out, clubbing his rifle. This was a hand-to-hand fight now, with no quarter sought or conceded.

Ron Brix summoned the snapping threads of his energy and hurled that remant into the battle. The butt of his rifle splintered against bone. There was a towering, writhing wave of red bodies sweeping around him, and he slugged at it. The sturdy rifle barrel was torn from his hands, and a stunning blow battered him to his knees.

A glinting knifeblade slashed downward at him. Coming in a long dive, a warrior plunged full against Ron's body, but Ron had gauged the knife hand and caught it.

He rolled with the blow. It was the Indian's momentum rather than Ron Brix's strength that did it. The savage flipped on over, and the small of his back catapulted into an iron-tired wheel. He lay there, grotesquely bent.

Ron got the knife, turned back again to the scene of mad fury and death.

Swaying back into the melee, Ron Brix saw that the fight was, for the moment, deadlocked. And he saw another thing—a face he recognized behind a mask of blood and powder burns. The features were hawklike, dark, and the eyes had an unnatural look of being bloody.

Link Sawtrey saw him at the same instant. His lips were back from his teeth, his eyes burning with the lust to kill. Perhaps it was accident, perhaps intent. Sawtrey chopped a man out of his way with a pistol barrel, and the path was clear between them.

Ron Brix struck with the knife as they came together. Sawtrey smashed at it with his pistol and the blade snapped off.

Then Ron went down with Sawtrey sprawling over him.

WEAKLY, Ron reached out with his hands. The fingers buried themselves in the cords and muscles of a throat, and he squeezed. Sawtrey was smashing at his face with the pistol. It was no good; his fingers weren't strong enough to stop that. His rolling head eluded one blow, eluded another; and a third glanced away from his forehead . . . .

Ringing in his ears suddenly was the sound of shots. That was queer. There hadn't been room or time for shooting for many minutes. He couldn't dodge again. He looked up into the stubbled, twisted face of Link Sawtrey and the bloody eyes. The face had frozen, seemingly. Why didn't the man strike again?

A movement beyond Sawtrey's shoulder took away Ron Brix's half-conscious attention. He couldn't make it out at first. A dun pony was coming out of the woods; and hunched in the saddle, a rifle slanting across his chest, was a man. It was red-bearded Earl Brucker, and running in front of him like a young deer, unhurt, was Judy Harper.

Ron Brix wanted to shout to her to stay away; she would be killed. Then he saw that the fighting was done, and that the Indians were gone. Wrapped in his own battle, he hadn't noticed that.

All but Sawtrey were gone. Sawtrey was here, over him, and his fingers were propping up Sawtrey's neck. Sawtrey would strike at him and he couldn't dodge any more.

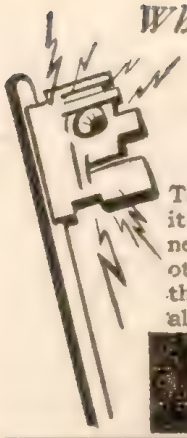
Ron wanted to hear Judy's voice again, but he knew he wouldn't; he was going to die before she could reach him. He couldn't hold Sawtrey back any longer. His fingers were numb, trembling with weakness and he let Sawtrey's throat slide out of them.

Limp and lifeless, Link Sawtrey's body slumped down against Ron Brix's chest, rolled loosely to one side. Ron looked stupidly at Sawtrey's swollen neck and at his own fingers from which he had thought the strength was gone. Fury had given new life to them.

He got to his feet somehow. A man running by him yelled, "It's Brucker! Brucker and Judy Harper!"

That wrenched Ron's thoughts back to Judy. No danger for her any more. Sawtrey's renegades were whipped and scattered, and Sawtrey was dead. Judy had seen him and was running to him, her auburn hair flying about her face. There was fright in her brown eyes, yet they were aglow, too. Standing there, because he knew if he moved he would fall, Ron Brix wondered what that glow meant. What was he going to say to her? What could he say to her?

There was no need to say anything. She was here, close to him, and his arms had gone up and about her. Her face was



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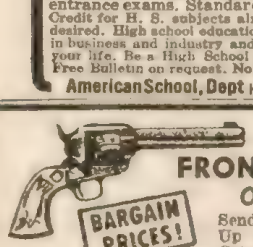

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against his, soft and warm and strengthening, and her brown eyes were deep, inviting pools. Then Ron Brix forgot the camp, this pit of hell in the mountains, and the bleak bitterness of the past. At last he found he could tell of his love, blurting it out huskily, awkwardly.

Judy Harper was close to him, part of him, sobbing, "Oh, Ron, Ron, I've wanted so much to let you say that to me!"

"This is the beginning," he told her. "Everything I've wanted is in front of me now."

Eager hands were helping Earl Brucker down from the saddle he had endured so much to hold. He growled, "How'd we get here? Judy's pony got away from Sawtrey and came back. She got me aboard and we came on down. But that don't matter. Where's Brix? There's a man for my money, boys. Get my legs patched up, and I'll tell you—"

It was old Eben Harper, his gray beard streaked with blood, who insisted on helping his daughter lift Ron Brix into one of the wagons. There, in the early light of a new day, he crouched on his knees like a benign patriarch.

"Maybe, son," he murmured, "there's a lot we can talk over now. Or maybe it don't need talking about at all."

Ron shook his head slowly. "I reckon it doesn't."

The old man's eyes were kindly, proud. "We'll be going on in a day or so. To Salt Lake, it seems like now. We've had scouts out. There's a valley there, and everything we need. There'll be a place for you, son—and we'll need you."

Judy Harper's slim, strong hand was lying in Ron's. He gripped it and looked up into her eyes and after a moment said quietly, "I won't be alone when I get there, will I?"

Then the touch of her soft, clinging lips was a promise of a new world opening up before him. . . . ● ● ●

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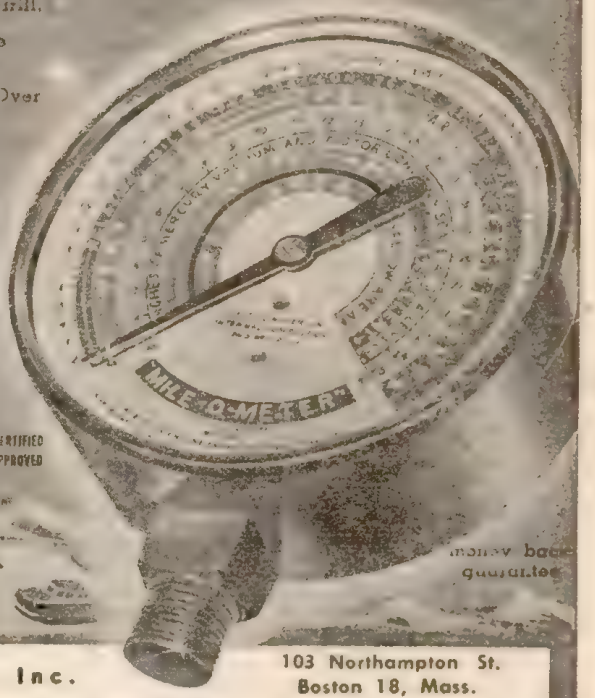

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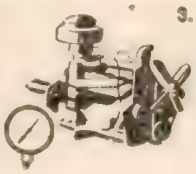

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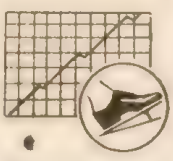

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(Continued from page 8)

fore dawn, he harnessed his buckboard and set out, with his rifle and ten-year-old boy. The road led near Nate Champion's log spread.

Bill heard the sound of rifle fire, and shrugged. It was none of his affair, he figured. But as he tooled the team around a bend in the road, he changed his mind. Six gun-hung gents rode out and commanded him to halt, with rifles leveled.

No one will ever know if Bill England, at that moment, believed that he recognized among those men one or two who had visited his little ranch back there on the Sweetwater. Nor will anyone know what blinding hatred rose up in him again—a surge of emotion that caused him instinctively to identify himself with those neighbors whose friendship he had, up to this instant, refused. He noted that the single telegraph wire between Casper and Buffalo was down. Flinging his rifle to his shoulder, he yelled to his son to get down in the leather.

Shots rattled close to him as the team plunged ahead. The buckboard swayed; a few bullets smashed into the rattling boards.

With the kid leaning over the front, whipping the team with one hand and holding the sawing reins in the other tight-clenched little fist, Bill England crouched behind him, the rifle snarling at those gunmen who hung grimly on the chase.

Well they knew that if he got through their plans of a sudden roundup of rustlers would be ruined. But Bill England was at last out of range. He didn't even feel his bullet-smashed ribs until the outfit careened into Buffalo and drew up before the sheriff's office.

The rest is history. A posse of over a hundred aroused ranchers rode out. They were too late to save the courageous Champion, but they besieged the invader force at

(Continued on page 106)

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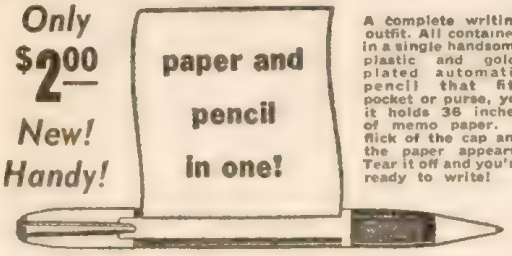

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(Continued from page 104)

Crazy Woman Creek. For two days the fight continued, until a troop of U. S. cavalry brought peace to the country.

Bill England and his son rode with that posse. He fought shoulder to shoulder with the same men who had said that what Bill England needed was a good dose of hang-tree medicine. With the same men who had said that he was a spy of the Big Pool, a traitor to his neighbors.

When the Johnson County War was over, Bill rode back to his little spread with his son. He took up life where he had left off.

One night, not long after the invasion, another committee called upon Bill England. As before, he came to the door in his nightshirt. The town banker climbed down from his saddle and held something out to Bill. Something that glittered in the moonlight.

Gingerly Bill England took it, looked at it, and grinned. It was a gold watch. Inside the case, engraved in flowing script were the words:

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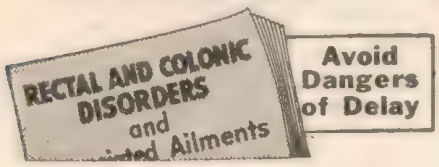

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(Continued from page 26)

the five men with him. "You boys know anything about this?"

Travis smiled thinly. "Hell, yes. He told us the whole thing when he hired us to sign on here, one at a time, so Underhill wouldn't suspect any of us."

Emerson turned his curious gaze on Loreena. "How'd you learn all this family history? Blaze tell you?"

"Yes, after he talked to you in the lane and told you about meeting me in Ketchahoosie. That's why he wouldn't tell you what name he took in Ketchahoosie—he'd taken his own name, Charles Gloster." Loreena gave Emerson a wan smile. "He wanted to redeem the name of Gloster."

Emerson said, "Well, if you ask me, I'd say he damn well done it. Too bad, but I'm scared the Hull-Gloster feud is as dead as a axed lobo."

"Couldn't be deader." Blaze sat up, pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and began mopping the blood from his face. "We'll marry the last of the Hulls to the last of the Glosters—and don't you try to squirm out of it." He glared at Loreena. "You promised in front of all these witnesses, and you're stuck with it."

Loreena said, "Then get up from there and go find a preacher. You didn't really fool me with your silly playing possum. I saw you open your eyes and wink at Al."

Farragut got to his feet; he was groggy, but his blue eyes were twinkling. "And we'll tear down the fences and add this ranch to the Lazy H."

Emerson said, "Mmm. Okay. But you can't make it a joint brand. Burn too much hide."

Farragut grinned at Loreena. "Who said anything about a joint brand? We're closing out the Rafter G. Slap the Lazy H on everything. Even me."

Loreena said, "I don't see how you could help yourself. My father put his brand on you long ago." ● ● ●

GHOST TOWN REUNION

By

BEN ARNOLD

Across the red hell of gunsmoke, two burned-out oldsters renewed their partnership vows.

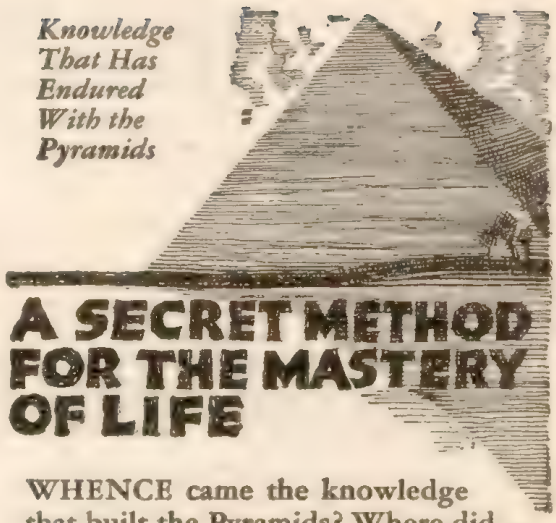
HARDPAN MILLER was generally acknowledged as Bonanza's first citizen, the daddy of that short-lived but colorful boom camp on the barren slope of Red Dog Mountain. Ever an optimist, Hardpan had figured that the pocket of gleaming nuggets uncovered by his pick must be an outcrop of the mother lode—and Hardpan had the stubborn faith and pride to back his discovery against the world.

But he celebrated unwisely and too well after his visit to the assay office. There he discovered his old partner, a dour and gloomy little man named Soapy Halliday, and together they unwittingly spread news of the strike.

Bonanza, its three saloons—one of which was a general store and stage station—and its score of log and canvas dwellings was the result. It did not take the red-shirted, eager bunch of miners long to discover that Bononza failed miserably to live up to its name. And when word came that pure wire gold was in sight over at the Quartz Creek diggings, Bonanza's doom was sealed.

To Hardpan's mind the fact that men could be so easily moved from his own camp was little short of incredible. Why,

Knowledge That Has Endured With the Pyramids



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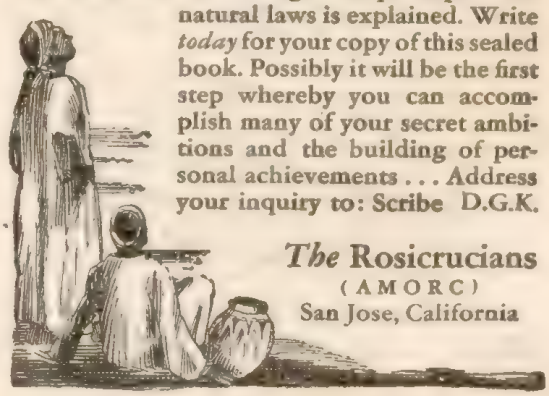

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the next day or the next moment of work would certainly uncover a vein which would make Quartz Creek look like nothing. Vainly he strode down the muddy length of Nugget Street, pleading, haranguing and cursing.

Yet all his eloquence, indignation and profanity were futile against the lure of the new rumor. The tangle of mules, men and wagons finally straightened out along the rutted Quartz Creek road, and Hardpan, his white beard bristling, strode back to find solace in the determination to stick, which, he knew, his partner shared with him.

Then, at the door of their cabin, he stopped short in amazement. There was Soapy, sweating and straining as he laced his pack on his mule.

"You — you — " gasped Hardpan. "Soapy! You ain't a-goin' to run out on me? Not like the rest?"

Soapy lifted a perspiring face, took a bite of Battle Axe plug and rested. "Me, I aim to go where there's gold. Hardpan, there ain't nothin' here. This camp's cleaned out—through. Better you come along with us."

"You're yellow, then!" fumed Hardpan. "No fit man for a partner! Hell, I made the first strike here an' I'll make another! The same ground's here that give me that gold; it holds tons more of it. I built this camp—its part of me! An' I ain't leavin'! I'll show up you an' the others an' that four-flushin' Quartz Crick camp! And don't never think you can come back here after you find Quartz Crick is a fake, neither!"

But as winter approached Hardpan found that the days were dull, and he was assailed by the loneliness of his one-man town. He worked faithfully, but for no reward. As he faced the prospect of the long snows, he began thinking more and more of the games of seven-up he used to have with Soapy; his ears rang with the remembered sounds of the camp when the boys

got back from the gold diggings at night. the defenders was still alive and conscious.

"Quartz Crick!" he snorted disdainfully to his burro. "To hell with it!" Then: "Wonder if Soapy's any better at seven-up than he was. Wouldn't mind takin' a trip over there before I get snowed in—just to laugh at the damn fool!"

And so it was, one October morning, that Harpan started out for the Creek, his mind filled with the glittering lies he'd tell his old partner of Bonanza's returned glory. . . .

A light flurry of snow was falling when he cut from the trail onto the stage road. It increased as the day progressed, and by noon the flakes were swirling so that Hardpan's old eyes could scarcely see a foot before him.

By nightfall he was staggering, fighting the fatal somnolence of the numbing cold and rubbing tobacco juice in his eyes to

spur his leaden limbs to motion. He stumbled and fell into a drift, rose painfully, only to fall again. And then, like a deathly blanket, the snow and the cold wrapped him close. . . .

IT SEEMED no more than natural that the first face he recognized should be Soapy Halliday's. A fire was roaring in a sheltered spot off the trail; Soapy was feeding him brandy, massaging Hardpan's feet and hands.

"Lucky for you that we was huntin' the snowed-in stage," grumbled Soapy.

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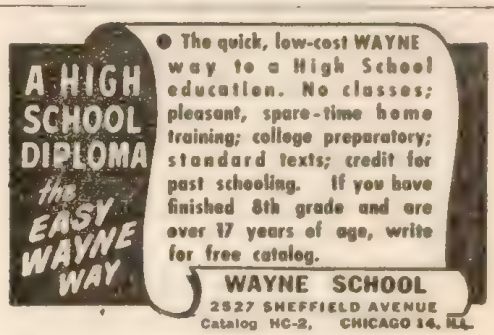
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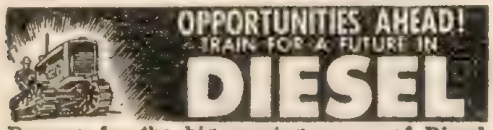

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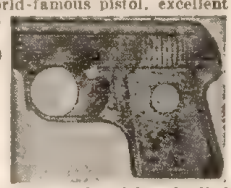

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"What's the matter—you finally borrowed some sense from your mule an' decided to try a real camp? That it?"

"Hell, no!" said Hardpan spunkily. "Just totin' some grub fer you, 'cause I had a hunch you'd be starvin' to death in that poverty camp. Me, I done struck it rich, just like I told you I would. If you hadn't been a pig-headed fool to leave when you did, you'd—"

"We're eatin' off plates hammered out of picture gold!" Soapy retorted. "But just outa curiosity, an' since we're nearer your two-bit ghost-town than we are to a live camp, I'll take you back to your cabin."

The sky had cleared. Hardpan, on Soapy's mule, followed the Quartz Creek man as he broke the trail.

"Don't expect nothin' fancy in the cabin," Hardpan warned Soapy as they approached the deserted camp. "Me, I don't spread my gold around the way you say you do. I got it stashed away, all safe. But purty soon I'm goin' to buy me a few railroads, an'—"

He broke off. Smoke was rising from the chimney of his cabin. Who was there?

They were not long in finding out. The door pushed open a crack; a gun muzzle poked out and there was a flash, a crack of a .30-30 and a lead slug kicked snow in their faces.

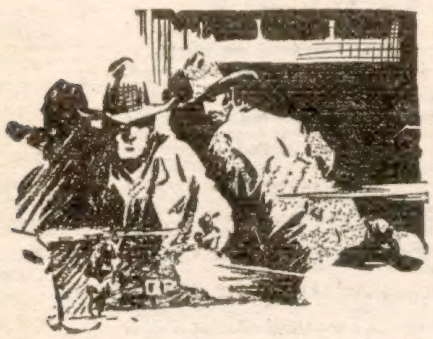
"A real nice hospitable Bonanza welcome," grinned Soapy, lugging Hardpan off the mule and unlimbering his own long-barreled rifle. He sent a shot in answer, and then, taking advantage of the brush and rocks, the two oldsters started to return the fire.

Stiff, half frozen, they edged closer, pumping lead into the cabin. It was a tough battle while it lasted. And at last, when bullets no longer came from the log fort, when Hardpan had crawled painfully up to rake the interior through an end window, and Soapy took the rear, they found three silent bullet-riddled forms inside. One of

the forted-up defenders was still alive.

He looked up from sunken, dimming eyes. "I'll never live to have you damn badge-toters take me back to hang!" he muttered. "Take the bounty money for the Cripple Creek stage job, an' that's all you'll get. . . ."

Hardpan's face was a study, as he looked,



big-eyed, at Soapy. But Soapy, perhaps a bit light-headed from loss of blood, stared dourly down at the dying road agent.

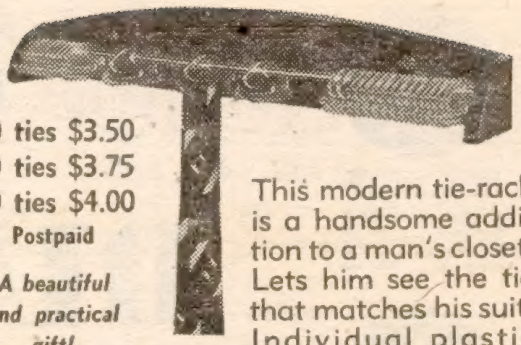
"A hell of a nerve, Hardpan, to pick *our* cabin! By damn, they shore made a fine mess of it! Take us a week to get things fixed up the way we used to have it. . . ."

"Partner!" grinned Hardpan. "Partner, didn't you hear this stick-up gent mention head-money? Hell, we'll have a better cabin, now. An' . . ." He stopped, looking questioningly at Soapy.

"An' what?"

"I was just thinkin' that maybe I was layin' it on too thick about this camp, partner. Guess maybe you was right to move. I was still sweatin' over the low-grade vein when I set out to visit you—to make you feel sorry you'd left!"

Soapy cleared his throat. "To tell the truth, Hardpan, maybe I was a mite over-enthusiastic, myself. Happens that luck played agin' me an' the boys at Quartz Crick. There didn't seem much truth to that fancy tale of a rich strike there, an'—damn it, I been hungerin' for a game of seven-up, with you a-sittin' across the table, cussin' me!" ● ● ●



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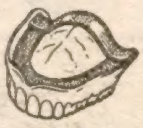

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Far more brilliant than
DIAMONDS

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2 carats..... 66.00
3 carats..... 90.00
4 carats..... 114.00

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c. PRINCESS EARRINGS
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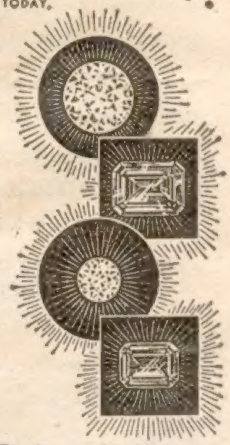

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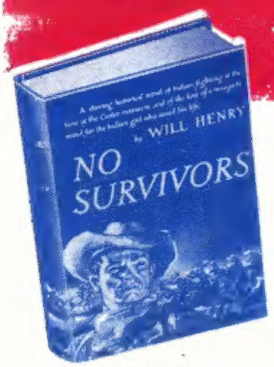

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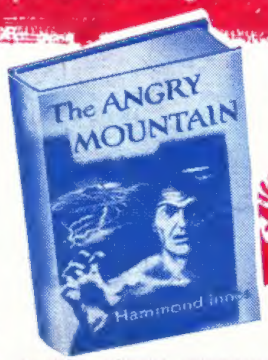

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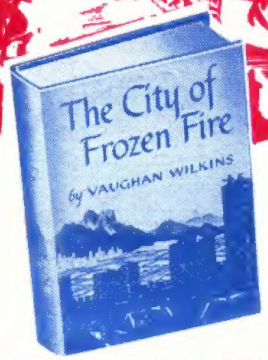

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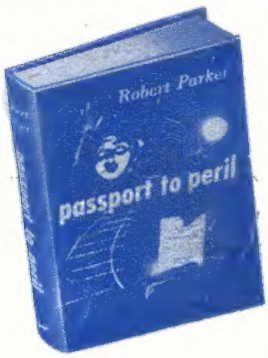

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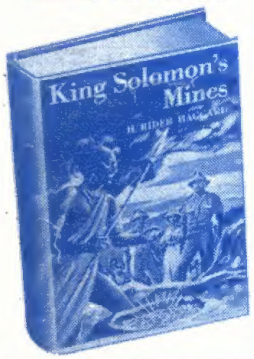

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